TRY BEFORE YOU BUY?

The Case For Premarital Chastity

Gregory Koukl
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Gregory Koukl
If you want a guaranteed nomination for oddball of the year, announce to your friends or co-workers that you think sex is only for marriage.

A few will think you quaint, if somewhat naive. Most, though, view such archaic notions as peculiar, eccentric, and even bizarre. Virgins are made to feel like nerds. If you’re not sexually active, especially if you haven’t “gotten lucky” by the time you’re 18, it’s probably because you’re a social reject, an undesirable.

In spite of social pressure a growing number of brave singles are making the promise to wait. Still others, who have been sexually active in the past, are committing to what might be called a “second virginity.” Regardless of their pasts, they’re making commitments to start over, living as “virgins” until they make lifelong commitments in marriage.

The reason is not because they’ve got crooked teeth, have bad complexions, don’t bathe, or have no manners. Rather, it’s because they believe God has the best insight on building strong relationships and durable marriages.

This is not the conventional wisdom of non-Christians, however. To many it just makes sense to test the sexual waters before agreeing to settle down with one person. Even some Christian authors are advocating “responsible sex” for unmarrieds.
Those who are courting, according to this view, should not only explore the social, psychological, and emotional aspects of their relationships to make sound decisions about marriage, they should also explore each other sexually. This builds intimacy and helps a couple discover if they’re sexually compatible.

Reserving sex for marriage, they’ll concede, is an admirable ideal. The facts of modern culture, though, make the goal unrealistic. The burdens young people and adults carry are too intense, the peer pressure too demanding. It’s simply cruel and irresponsible to ask so much. “Just say no” might be an intelligent slogan when it comes to drugs, they say, but it just won’t work when confronting the blossoming sexuality of young adults.

Is it wise to test-drive your potential mate in bed to see if all the sexual pistons are firing? Is chastity, though an honorable ideal, unrealistic given the realities of modern life and the pressures adolescents and adults face?

I think not, and I’d like to tell you why. This notion reflects mistaken ideas on the nature of human sexuality. It creates some serious practical problems. Finally, this view runs aground of God’s wisdom and God’s commands.

**Three Errors About the Nature of Sexuality**

First, this view of testing for sexual compatibility makes three errors about the nature of sexuality: it diminishes sex to the mechanical, it diminishes lovemaking to physical pleasure, and it underestimates the flexibility of sexual tastes.
SEXUALITY IS MORE THAN JUST MECHANICS

The first problem with this view is that it reduces sexuality to the mechanics of physical performance.

The title of a well-known book, *Sex Begins in the Kitchen*, makes a great point. It suggests that a critical part of our sexual fulfillment has nothing to do with what goes on in the bedroom. Some have said that the most powerful sexual organ in your body is your brain. Both of these, incidentally, are truths that women seem to understand better than men.

Simply put, the power of sex and the effectiveness of a good sex life are not to be found merely in mechanics; these things are primarily – though not entirely – relational, not mechanical.

The fact is, many of you reading this know that a dramatic and powerful sexual experience turns sour when the relationship goes bad. A good relationship can be improved by better mechanics, but good technique can’t build a sound partnership.

An ironic footnote to this discussion is that good sex can actually be a danger sign. Some of the most unhealthy relationships are accompanied by tremendous sexual intensity. Absence makes the heart grow fonder, the old saying goes. Distance, or even the threat of distance, heightens our sense of need and thus our desire.

Unstable relationships, especially in adolescence and young adulthood, are characterized by arguments, disagreements, misunderstandings that initially create emotional distance. This threat of loss produces a deep sense of abandonment and aloneness and the subsequent reconciliation can really launch the libido. That’s why making up is so sweet.
You know the pattern. A couple has a big fight; they exchange harsh words; each retreats to his or her own corner. Then they have a change of heart. They forgive, reconcile and start tearing each other’s clothes off. Wild, crazy, passionate sex follows because of the intensity of emotions brought on by the threat of loss.

Later on in life, this emotional seesaw gets old and the eroticism dissipates, but the fighting and distancing remain.

In this case, the thing that makes a person great in bed is the very thing that will ruin a marriage. Conversely, things that make for a healthy marriage – respect, self-control, kindness, charity, sensitivity, patience – do not lend themselves to sexual intensity at the outset. In the long run, however, these qualities will stabilize the relationship and contribute to a healthy and satisfying sex life.

I think this observation makes another point. The kinds of sexual problems in marriage that premarital experimenting might cure are not primarily sexual problems, but people problems. They have less to do with technique in sex than with technique in living.

Is your sweetheart patient, sensitive, self-sacrificial, understanding, kind, concerned about your particular needs, willing to flex, adventuresome? Those are the qualities that make the real difference, and you can discover them without jumping into the sack together for a couple of nights to see if all the machinery works.

**LOVEMAKING IS MORE THAN PHYSICAL PLEASURE**

The “try before you buy” view misrepresents the nature of sexuality in a second way; it diminishes lovemaking to physical pleasure.
I’m 45 years old at the time of this writing and, although I’ve been celibate for over 20 years, I’m not sexually inexperienced or naive. A powerful aspect of human sexuality that I became aware of right from the outset – something I later discovered to be profoundly biblical – was that human sexuality was not just for procreation and recreation; it was for identification, too.

One of the most powerful aspects of sex is the bonding that results from giving, from self-surrender, from vulnerability, from self-sacrifice, and from physical and emotional transparency. These are elements that create a deep and intimate identification, a collapse of the ego boundaries in which the two become one in a very profound sense.

This is not a skill that’s developed through short-term sexual encounters; it’s a oneness you must build together over time. And time requires stability and commitment.

I understand there are sexual problems that are serious, but I’m not at all convinced that testing the sexual waters is going to surface them. Worse, it may create problems that aren’t really there to begin with.

Some “problems” are merely the product of naiveté, inexperience, and simple modesty. They could easily be overcome with kindness, patience, and a little time, but they can become galvanized in the performance environment of a sexual test run.

In fact, that’s part of the problem with this view. When you’re testing each other, you’re...well...testing each other. Ladies, how comfortable would you feel jumping into bed and having your sexual competence tested? Gentlemen, do you think this environment would bring out your best performance?
No, sexuality is developed in its deepest and most satisfying way in an atmosphere of safety and commitment where neither person is concerned that his or her performance on any given night is going to disqualify them.

**OUR SEXUAL TASTES ADAPT**

Third, this view of sexuality underestimates the flexibility of sexual tastes. Sexual preferences are very malleable, my friends. Tastes change. Plump women were *de rigueur* during the Renaissance; willowy wisps were hot in the ‘60’s.

Let me illustrate. When I was a teenager, my high school sweetheart was a petite, 5’4”, 110 pound cheerleader with short hair and sparkling eyes. I fell for her like a rock. Six years later when we went our separate ways, what was I looking for? A bouncy, girl-next-door, cheerleader-type. I ended up with an elegant Japanese-Caucasian woman.

After that relationship, I moved to Thailand. When I returned, I was looking for another Asian girl, black-haired, black-eyed, black-skinned, the darker the better. A year later I fell in love with a blue-eyed, red-haired, freckle-faced Irish lass.

Now I have a weakness for strawberry blondes, but an engaging brunette could eclipse that in a moment. The things that physically attract us are very malleable, allowing us to bond sexually to the one we’re with. The deepening relationship fosters a deepening physical attraction for our life’s partner.

After all, what do two young people experimenting with sex know about what they want? That’s the beauty of God’s plan. He puts two people together who are committed for life who know nothing about what they want.
They begin growing and experimenting, developing their sexual tastes together so that each can become the other’s sexual ideal.

**THE DOWN SIDE**

There are some serious applicational problems to this view. Experimenting with sex can be dangerous. It can damage your relationships, it can damage your judgment, it can damage your family, and it can damage your body.

**SEXUAL INTENSITY BECOMES A SUBSTITUTE FOR INTIMACY**

Sex is powerful and can easily get out of control if you give it reign. If sex is on the agenda, it quickly goes from being the dessert to being the main course.

Men and women both know this from experience. Men know it viscerally, in their gut; they go for the gold the first chance they get. Women know it as a vague but growing sensation of being used.

Soon every date ends up in the sack or rolling around in the back seat. Instead of channeling energy into probing each other’s person, couples spend it probing each other’s body, robbing the relationship of its depth. That gets a little old, doesn’t it, ladies?

When sexual exploration becomes a legitimate part of the acquaintance process, it quickly becomes the first part, rather than the last part, and then often the only part, rather than one part of many.

Often the result is the illusion of intimacy when there is no true intimacy, the illusion of closeness when two people are still strangers.

If your relationship is flat, the temptation is strong to
spice it up with sex. That’s a sign that the intimacy you share is not healthy enough to stand on its own, so you go for the quick fix. Sex should be the outgrowth of increasing intimacy rather than the cause of it, only after the commitment of marriage.

If sex is not an option before marriage, then all of a couple’s energies are directed toward developing more soulish or interior dimensions of their relationship, allowing them to build a stable foundation for a healthy future sex life to rest upon.

**SEXUAL PASSION DISTORTS JUDGMENT**

There’s another problem. Sex distorts judgment. Just as a blazing torch can twist a solid piece of steel, the heat of passion can bend a relationship all out of shape. It can warp a person’s focus and twist good judgment.

When a couple thinks of marriage, they need to be able to assess the strength of their love and commitment. Even under the best of circumstances, this can be difficult, but sexual involvement complicates the issue. In *Finding the Love of Your Life*, psychologist Neil Clark Warren warns:

If we want to have strong families that emerge from wise selections of marriage partners, we need to overhaul our reasoning about the relationship between love and sex. If we continue telling single persons that sexual intimacy is healthy at whatever stage of their relationship, they will continue getting married for all the wrong reasons. Once they have made this fundamental error, their marriage – and ultimately their family – will evolve into a struggle with no winners.
How do you know, for example, that the closeness and intimacy you feel between you and your sweetheart are a result of your strong partner-skills? Maybe your libido is jump-starting the relationship, giving the illusion that you have a lot going for you?

How can you distinguish whether the two of you are good in life together or merely temporarily good in bed together? That question is a lot easier to answer if you’re not sexually involved.

When the foundation for a life commitment is a couple’s shared personal depth, then sexual favors become the gravy, the extra touch, the gilded edge. It’s a type of “relationship glue” designed by God to bind the good stuff together when the going gets tough, which inevitably happens even in the best relationships.

The glue works in unhealthy couplings, too. It’s no secret that many lousy relationships survived on sex drive alone long after they should have been abandoned on their own merits.

A profound bonding results whenever two people are sexually intimate, especially if they’ve shared orgasms. People are so emotionally naked during sexual climax that they often feel awkward and embarrassed moments afterwards when their heads have cleared. Without the protection of a lifelong commitment, this can produce distance, not closeness and intimacy.

**Premarital Sex Weakens Marriages**

Premarital sex can also destabilize marriages. Here’s how. If you demonstrate self-control in your sexual behavior before you get married – if you’ve been in the habit of saying no to sex as a single person – it’s easier to demonstrate self-control and say no to sexual temptations once you’re married.
If you’ve developed little sexual self-control as a single person, you have to reverse that pattern once you’re married. Common sense says that can be a tough trick.

To prove my point, ask yourself a simple question, ladies. Would you feel safer – more secure in your husband’s promise to forsake all others – if he sexually experimented with a variety of women while single and with you extensively before you were married? Or would you feel more comfortable if he has already demonstrated years of self-control before your marriage and considered it an issue of honor to be chaste with you during your courtship? The answer is obvious.

**PREMARITAL SEX IS DANGEROUS**

Finally, sex is physically dangerous, now more than ever. Sexually active young people must face the risk of a parade of sexually transmitted diseases.

Syphilis is at a 40-year high. Four million cases of chlamydia occur every year. More than 16% of the adult population is infected with herpes. There are 1.3 million new cases of gonorrhea annually. And then there’s the human immunodeficiency virus, the deadly HIV, which makes other sexually transmitted diseases look like diaper rash.

There’s also the risk of pregnancy. The experience of becoming a parent should be one of the most wonderful events of your life. Instead, the beautiful phrase, “I’m going to have a baby,” is transformed into something frightening. Once a proclamation of joy, it now signals tragedy and remorse.

Even those who are deeply committed pro-lifers waver when they’re the ones facing an unplanned pregnancy. Abortion starts looking like a reasonable alternative. Reports show that as many Christian women
seek abortions as non-Christians. The woman who secretly disposes of her child in a moment of weakness shoulders the burden of that crime the rest of her life.

Those who carry their children to term face a host of overwhelming difficulties. Education plans are postponed or abandoned altogether. Career hopes are dashed. The financial burden can be staggering, especially for young adults.

Often the mother finds herself deserted, facing all these problems alone. She nurses her own heartache in solitude, overcome by the responsibility of caring for another human being for years on end.

Children are often robbed of a stable home anchored by two parents, as God intended. Frequently, there’s no parent in the home at all; little boys and girls are raised by daycare centers because mom or dad must work to support the family by themselves. Such neglect can have irreparable, lifetime repercussions.

Unplanned pregnancies are not always this bleak, but they’re always much more difficult than anyone imagines in advance. Frequently, there’s a heavy strain on the extended family who has to share parenting chores. There’s little extra money and almost no extra time. Add to that the difficulty of courting when you’re a single parent, and it’s easy for life to seem hopeless.

In fact, a woman’s life will never be the same, and the clock cannot be turned back. The private act of sensuality that “isn’t hurting anybody” becomes a public concern that robs everyone of God’s best, including the children. Unfortunately, many become convinced of the wisdom of abstinence long after it’s too late.
THE SCRIPTURAL BOTTOM LINE

So far we’ve talked about practical concerns regarding premarital sex. But if you’re a Christian and you revere the Scriptures, then you must be honest about the straightforward commands they contain. If you understand them as an expression of God’s desire, as a guide to human conduct, then they must guide your decisions about your sexual behavior. This raises two issues.

THE PROBLEM OF REVELATION

First is the problem of revelation. The Scripture, both the Old and New Testaments, makes it clear that God made sex for, and limits it to, male-female sexuality expressed within the confines and the protection of a life-long committed relationship. The Scripture has no record of affirmative, positive sexual directives – or sexual role models – outside marriage, but it knows many prohibitions.

As far as I can tell, there are six sexual activities prohibited in the Bible: homosexuality, adultery, fornication, rape, incest, and bestiality.

Note first that all but one (rape) are consentual; the idea of unrestrained sexual freedom for consenting adults is foreign to the Bible.

Note second that each prohibition involves having sex with someone other than one’s spouse. Inside marriage sex is undefiled; outside marriage it’s forbidden. God gives sexual freedom only to husbands and wives – not to friends or co-workers, not to casual dates or long-time sweethearts who are in love.

Solomon uses vivid language in his counsel. He tells us not to pour the pure waters of our sexuality into the gutter (Proverbs 5:16-20). By contrast, he says,
“Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in the wife of your youth....Let her breasts satisfy you at all times; be exhilarated always with her love,” not with the love of a stranger.

When asked about divorce, Jesus said that God’s plan has been the same from the beginning: one man and one woman for life. “But from the beginning of creation, God made them male and female,” He said. “For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother, and the two shall become one flesh; consequently they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate.” (Mark 10:6-9)

The Apostle Paul adds his own thoughts in 1 Thessalonians 4:3-6:

For this is the will of God, your sanctification; that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each of you know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, not in lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God; and that no man transgress and defraud his brother in the matter because the Lord is the avenger in all these things, just as we also told you before and solemnly warned you.

This is the most important problem with the view that you must sexually test one another before you get married. The counsel is a violation of the commands of the Scripture.

If you’re a Christian, that option is not open to you. If you use the Bible as the rule of conduct in one area of life, then the Bible applies with equal moral force in other areas of life, and you are obliged to obey.
THE PROBLEM OF THE IDEAL

The second problem is kin to the first. It’s a problem of theological consistency relating to the use of the word “ideal.”

Some suggest that what the Bible teaches in the area of premarital sexual behavior is merely an ideal. It’s always good to shoot for the ideal, they contend, but sometimes the ideal is unrealistic. You can’t reach it, so instead of abandoning the ideal altogether, you opt for something short of it.

The problem with this word “ideal” is that it implies varying degrees of better. Put another way, there is one kind of conduct that is good, there’s another that’s better, there’s one that’s much, much better, and finally there’s one that’s ideal. A person finds a comfortable spot somewhere along the continuum, though usually short of what’s optimal.

The use of the word “ideal,” however, misrepresents the issue. Biblically, we don’t choose our morality on a sliding scale from worse to better. When we depart from the biblical command, we are not choosing something that’s merely short of the ideal; we’re choosing something that’s sinful and wrong.

The word “ideal” is misleading because sexual chastity is not God’s ideal; it’s God’s command. If we fall short of the command, we are not doing something less than the ideal; we are disobeying.

Christians who argue this way are inconsistent because they would not apply the same rationale to other moral directives in the Scripture. Consider these examples.

Could someone say that not murdering is the ideal, but sometimes that’s asking too much and a person
should just do his or her best and try not to leave too many corpses in their wake?

Sure, we made a sacred vow at the marriage altar to forsake all others. In this society, with all the enticements to break our promises, isn’t the ideal a bit unrealistic?

It may be the ideal that we don’t mistreat our children, but sometimes they simply drive us nuts and we lose it. We do our best not to wound our kids too frequently, but it’s okay to draw blood once in a while. What’s wrong with that? I’m merely falling short of the ideal.

This view of the ideal ultimately reduces morality to moral relativism. It’s wrong to murder, not merely less than ideal. It’s wrong to commit adultery. It’s wrong to abuse children physically, and it’s wrong to have premarital sex.

All these things are wrong, not merely short of what’s best. Because some things are more wrong than others doesn’t render those lesser wrongs somehow acceptable.

**A Game Plan**

I saved the scriptural issue for last. There are two reasons. First, it’s more important than all the others. The core of any relationship is trust, and the most obvious evidence of trust is obedience. Those who trust God obey Him.

Since every act of disobedience is a denial of trust, it whittles away at the heart of our dependence on God. When that happens, we compromise the most vital relationship we have on earth. Sexual immorality rapidly erodes our closeness to God at a time when we need Him most.
There’s a second reason. It’s easier to obey when we understand that God gives His commands for our good, not for our grief. As we’ve seen, durable benefits accrue for those who are chaste, but pitfalls abound for those who are not. God always has good reasons for telling us no.

**The Art of Bonding**

I can sum up all my previous comments in one sentence: There is no sexual relationship approved by God outside of marriage. God reserves overt sexual bonding for the protected relationship of a life-long commitment between a man and a woman.

Is there any room for affection or any place for physical closeness? Of course there is. Bonding occurs in many ways and is a critical ingredient in a healthy relationship.

Dr. Donald Joy has observed a series of steps that characterize the blossoming of a relationship between sweethearts.²

Each step is like a building block laid down in sequence during courtship, one upon the other, forming a solid foundation for lasting intimacy. The sequence goes like this:

**Eye to Body** – This is initial contact. You see someone and something about that individual is appealing. You’re drawn to him or her, and this attraction initiates the next step.

**Eye to Eye** – You briefly exchange glances, looking for a signal that the attraction is mutual.

**Voice to Voice** – The initial conversation breaks the ice. More talks follow. Some may be brief; others range into the night. This is the first step of self-disclosure, laying the foundation blocks of a genuine relationship.
**Hand to Hand** – The first physical contact is usually casual and non-romantic, a helping hand, an innocent touch. If it’s ignored, there’s no threat of rejection. If it’s warmly accepted, it signals deepening interest.

**Hand to Shoulder** – This is a friendly touch that is still non-committal, though it can suggest deepening closeness and commitment.

**Hand to Waist** – This step, with arms encircling the waist, is clearly romantic. Holding hands falls into this category, too. It shows a more personal interest and a deeper closeness. The focus is on shared experiences. Note that the couple is still side-by-side.

**Face to Face** – At this point the relationship turns a corner. Embracing, gazing into each other’s eyes and kissing signal deepening commitment if you haven’t rushed the earlier steps.

**Hand to Head** – An extension of the previous stage, this kind of touch communicates tenderness and deep affection.

The final steps are much more private and distinctly sexual. They are hand to body, mouth to breast, touching below the waist, and sexual intercourse. Dr. Joy advises taking each step slowly, building one upon another, saving the final steps only for marriage.

I think he’s right. These steps help guide the expression of your sexuality in a productive, affirming, and safe manner. They give ample opportunity for sharing honest concerns, kindness, sensitivity, gentleness, and affection. The result: genuine intimacy built over time instead of the deceptive substitute of overnight passion with no depth.
RX FOR SAFETY

Sex is powerful. It’s so powerful you must manage it with care. The best protection I know of is being accountable to a third party for your sexual behavior. This may seem like strong medicine. Believe me, it’s a compelling incentive to do what’s right.

Here’s the reason we need this. When we exceed our limits, retreat is very difficult because the law of diminishing returns sets in. What thrilled us last week is ho-hum today, so we have to go further next time to get the same sexual wallop. It changes the whole equation, though, when a third person is in the picture.

Here’s how it works. First, set precise, well-defined limits you both agree on. Next, enlist the aid of someone who will take this issue seriously – a parent, a roommate, a friend, or a pastor. He or she must be someone who will take the initiative to question you regularly about the details of your sexual behavior. Assure that person you’ll be honest when you’ve crossed your boundaries.

FOLLOWING THE BEAT OF A DIFFERENT DRUMMER

Virginity and sexual chastity are nothing to be ashamed about. They’re not unnatural, and some wonderful benefits accrue if you’re willing to “just say no” and delay sexual gratification.

The “try before you buy” mentality, on the other hand, shows a profound misunderstanding of the nature of human sexuality. It can be emotionally destructive and physically dangerous. Even more important, it’s a violation of God’s wisdom and disobedience to His commands.

If chastity is odd at all, it’s odd in a good way – it’s out of step with behavior that the mob approves of for the wrong reasons. “Try before you buy” may feel good, but it’s
destructive in the long haul. Those who cling to the biblical ethic in this area, who live their lives in commitment to Jesus Christ, regardless of what the contrary pressures may be, reap the rewards.

I own a cleverly worded t-shirt that says, “Practice safe sex. Get married and stay faithful.” This simple biblical truth offers more peace of mind than a closet full of condoms and more wisdom than any “safe sex” curriculum.


2 This material was distilled from a radio interview between Dr. James Dobson and Dr. Donald Joy, © 1983, Focus on the Family. Details are available through Focus on the Family, Colorado Springs, CA 80935-3550.

**Suggested Reading**

C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillian, 1952), chapters on “sexual morality” and “Christian marriage”


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There is a better way. Here it is.

Gregory Koukl is a radio talk show host, an award-winning writer, and founder and president of Stand to Reason. A central theme of his speaking and writing is that Christianity can compete in the marketplace of ideas when it’s properly understood and properly articulated, offering a sound, coherent world view and compelling answers to our deepest questions.

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