

## Redefining Sexual Purity by Shannon Ethridge

We often hear that Christians should remain sexually pure *until* marriage, but what about sexual purity *within* marriage? As a result of the *True Love Waits* movement and various other teachings, we usually associate “purity” with “abstinence.”

Does this mean that a married, sexually-active man or woman is no longer pure? Absolutely not. According to Hebrews 13:4 (NIV), “Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed *kept pure...*” (emphasis mine). Perhaps it’s simply time to redefine purity, broadening its definition to include all that God intends for our marriage beds.

I believe God designed sex within marriage to be the avenue through which we experience what our hearts long for most -- genuine intimacy. Intimacy can best be understood by breaking the word down in to syllables: *in-to-me-see*. Marriage is the ordained place where men and women can be vulnerable with one another, seeing into one another and finding acceptance for who we really are. Purity in marriage, therefore, consists of two people who live an open book life with one another, with nothing to hide from one another and no secret sins to mask.

Adam and Eve once knew such purity. In Genesis 2:25 (NLT), we read that “although Adam and his wife were both naked, neither of them felt any shame.” However, in Genesis 3:7, sin enters the picture and, “At that moment, their eyes were opened, and they suddenly felt shame at their nakedness. So they strung fig leaves together around their hips to cover themselves.” One minute Adam and Eve had heaven on earth, sexually speaking. They were completely open with each other, free to explore and enjoy one another without guilt, inhibitions, or negative consequences. Because of sin, such innocence and purity can never be known between a man and woman again -- or can it?

As difficult as it may be for Christian couples and even church leaders to discern and abide by God’s plan for sexual and emotional fulfillment within marriage, I believe it *is* possible. For example, I recently received the following e-mail from Glenna, who’s been married over 30 years:

I, like so many other Christian women, have had to learn that it is okay to enjoy and experiment with your mate. So many times I sense my husband starving for an exciting sexual experience and at times I’ve neglected to provide that. The temptation for each of us to turn elsewhere to get our needs met has felt overwhelming at times. But since reading *Every Woman’s Battle*, I’ve opened my mind to everything that God (and my husband) wants our sex life to be. As a result, my husband has become more attentive, more loving, and more open with me than ever before. I never knew such fulfillment could be found. I just wish it hadn’t taken us so long to discover it.

If you also desire for your marriage bed to be exciting and fulfilling, yet pure at the same time, consider that our sexuality isn’t just *what we do*, but rather *who we are*. Because we are such complex creations, let us consider...

The Four Components of Sexuality

God created us with not just a body, but also with a mind, heart, and spirit. These four components combine to form the whole of who God made us to be. Therefore, our bodies are only one aspect that we must guard against sexual impurity. It is vital that we also carefully guard our mind, heart, and spirit as well.

Perhaps Kevin and Ruth's experience can help you visualize this four-component concept even better. After their wedding, they proceeded into the reception hall where a long, lace-covered banquet table displayed the beautiful multi-tiered wedding cake, the crystal punch bowl and cups, sterling silverware, and frou-frou monogrammed napkins. The only problem was that whoever set up the table forgot to fasten the latch on one of the folding legs. As soon as the red punch was poured into the crystal punch bowl, the leg buckled and everything slid down to the floor with a *clatter!*

When all four of a table's legs aren't securely fastened, the chances of it becoming a slippery slope are pretty good. The same can be said of our sexuality. All four components -- mind, body, heart, and soul -- must be guarded in order for our lives to reflect purity and integrity rather than becoming a slippery slope into the pit of sexual compromise.

We can also apply this concept to marriage. In order for there to be balance and integrity in our relationships, there needs to be not just a physical connection, but also a spiritual, emotional, and mental connection in order for us to experience maximum intimacy and enjoyment.

So how can we guard our mind, body, heart and soul from sexual compromise? What things are both women and men prone to doing that undermine our sexual integrity? And how can we experience maximum intimacy and sexual purity within marriage? Couples can begin by...

### Getting Naked With One Another

Of course, I'm not just referring to physical nakedness, but also spiritual, emotional, mental nakedness as well -- and all without shame. After all, isn't that what God intended from the beginning? For us to live open-book lives with one another and with Him?

To set the stage for spiritual purity, I suggest that couples begin by getting spiritually naked, cultivating a spiritual connection first and foremost. Why is this even more important than a physical connection? Because when a couple shares a spiritual bond, the mental, emotional, and physical bond will naturally follow. By making a spiritual connection our main priority, we can enjoy sex as a *response* to closeness rather than simply as a *means* of closeness. It is vital that couples not settle for just physical *intensity*, but rather strive for genuine *intimacy*. Why? Simply stated, sex is so much more than intercourse. We must remember that sex was created by God to be an intimate, sacred act of worship that couples engage in together and as such, is something that stirs the soul like nothing else.

Begin your lovemaking by praying together and inviting God into your bedroom. Don't pray *at* your spouse, hurling vertical pleas for God to change your partner. Rather, pray *with* your spouse, exhibiting acceptance and unconditional love through the words you choose. If there are wounds between the two of you, talk those things through, working toward forgiveness rather than letting issues pile up. These issues can become a

wall that separates you, but through prayer and reconciliation they can become a bridge that reconnects you as a couple.

To foster emotional purity, I recommend that both husband and wife guard their hearts against anything that would serve to feed disillusionment and discontentment in the relationship. For example, comparing ourselves to other people can cause discouragement and hesitancy to freely give and receive love. Unhealthy comparisons of our spouse to other people only cause us to focus on their liabilities rather than their assets. If you find yourself falling prey to unhealthy comparisons, remind yourself of three wonderful things about your spouse (or about yourself), then say a prayer of thanks to God for His wonderful creation.

Of course, any comparison can escalate to an emotional affair that not only defiles the marriage relationship, but can also destroy it. Bill painted this picture vividly when he wrote in an e-mail, “My wife confided in me that she had allowed herself to be swayed by a man that she felt was paying a lot more attention to her than I was... We dove into the books and worked hard to restore our twenty-year marriage. I thought everything was fine until she recently told me that she met with him again three times last week. Her emotional affair has devastated me.”

No one *intends* to get tangled up in an emotional affair, therefore self-awareness is vital. If you find yourself sensing an attraction to or from someone else, avoid being alone with that person (even in a “public” place) and refrain from conversations that you wouldn’t want others to know about, including private e-mails, chat rooms, and telephone conversations. Remember Proverbs 4:23 -- the heart is to be guarded *above all else!* Find an accountability partner and give full permission to ask you the hard questions to keep you from falling into an emotional affair. By keeping our emotions in check and our hearts turned toward our spouse, we ensure the purity of the emotional bond we share.

To foster mental purity in marriage, train your brain to focus your mental energies on your spouse. Sexual fantasies should be limited to acts between husband and wife, involving no one else. While some couples assume that the use pornography will “spice up their marriage,” many will tell you that the opposite is true. Pornography fuels unhealthy lust outside of marriage and can cause both men and women to withdraw mentally and emotionally from their partner.

To safeguard your mind from straying outside of your marriage bed, I recommend leaving the lights on and keeping your eyes open during intimate moments together. It may seem unusual at first, but think about it. When we talk with someone, we don’t usually turn our backs or close our eyes. We prefer the intimate connection of face-to-face and eye-to-eye contact. A dark room or closed eyes can hinder, rather than foster, genuine intimacy if our minds are prone to wandering. Remaining mentally and visually focused on your spouse during lovemaking will help you feel more connected.

Getting physically naked with one another is probably not something I need to coach you on how to do, but I encourage women to do this more often. By God’s design, men naturally crave the visual stimulation of drinking his wife’s body in through his eyes. Wives are the only person ordained by God to provide such visual pleasure for their husbands, therefore we can help him maintain purity by providing for that need without hesitation, shame, or extreme inhibition.

I also encourage couples to engage in physical pleasure in the presence of one another rather than engaging in solitary masturbation. We train our bodies as to what it finds pleasurable, and once you train your body to fly solo, sharing the experience with a partner can prove challenging and frustrating. While some experts say that masturbation doesn't hurt anyone, we are being selfish lovers when engaging in sexual pleasure apart from our spouses rather than sharing a mutually satisfying experience. I suggest incorporating a "no masturbation" rule in marriage. When sexual tension is felt by either or both partners, it's a great impetus to draw us closer, creating a stronger, more intimate bond.

Some partners may feel that physical sexual intimacy is a completely optional part of their marriage. However, a sexless marriage is more than likely an indicator of a relationship on the rocks. God created us to be sexual beings and if our libido is low, there are likely medical or emotional issues hindering our natural sexual desires. I suggest you talk to your doctor or professional counselor if such is the case.

### The Rich Rewards of Purity

Once a man and woman learn to guard their mind, heart, spirit, and body from sexual compromise, they are free to discover the incredible joy of connecting not just physically, but also mentally, emotionally, and spiritually with one another.

To help you visualize the powerful bond that such a pure connection creates, imagine a light bulb and a laser beam. The power of a single light bulb is limited because it sends light in many different directions. However, with a laser beam, light rays are parallel to one another, instead of fanning out in all directions. A laser beam is so powerfully concentrated that you can cut metal or perform surgery with it.

Many marriages have only experienced "light bulb sex" rather than "laser beam sex." Because of pornography, masturbation, emotional affairs, fantasies, etc. our sexual energies are often spread out in a multitude of different directions. But I challenge both men and women to concentrate your sexual energies just like rays of light are concentrated in a laser beam. There is nothing purer, sexier, or more satisfying than the mind, body, heart, and soul connection God intends for us to enjoy within the holy bond of marriage.

### **[sidebar #1 begins]**

#### **Are You Engaged in a Battle for Sexual Integrity?<sup>1</sup>**

1. Do you have sexual secrets that you don't want anyone else to know about?
2. Do you feel secretly excited or powerful when you sense that another person finds you attractive?
3. Is remaining emotionally or physically faithful to one person a challenge for you?
4. Do you find yourself flirting or using sexual innuendos (even if you do not intend to) when conversing with someone you find attractive?
5. Have you ever used premarital or extramarital relationships to "medicate" your emotional pain?

6. Is there any area of your sexuality that (1) is not known by your spouse, (2) is not approved of by your spouse, or (3) does not involve your spouse?
7. Do you use pornography either alone or with a partner or converse with strangers in Internet chat rooms?
8. Do you fantasize about being intimate with someone other than your spouse?
9. Have you ever been unable to concentrate on work, school, or the affairs of your household because of thoughts or feelings you are having about someone else?
10. Do you avoid sex in your marriage because of the spiritual guilt or dirty feeling you experience afterward?

There is no “magic number” that will determine your level of sexual or emotional integrity. However, if reading through these questions has awakened you to the fact that your sexual activity, romantic behavior, or emotional attachments are a hindrance to your spiritual growth or purity in marriage, you will find *Every Woman’s Battle* or *Every Man’s Battle* helpful as you strive for victory in your area of struggle.

**[sidebar #1 ends]**

**[sidebar #2 begins]**

### **Is Cyberspace a Pure Place?**

Many couples today have fallen prey to the misconception that as long as they don’t get “physical” with someone else, they are not being unfaithful in their marriage. This mindset has led many into cyberspace, where they seek excitement from internet porn or chat rooms with a false sense of security. Consider the following statistics:

- Of 86 married people surveyed, 83% do not see electronic “dates” as cheating<sup>ii</sup>
- 79.7% said it was okay for a significant other to reply to an unsolicited instant message or chat with a stranger of the opposite sex<sup>iii</sup>
- 40 million U.S. adults regularly visit Internet pornography websites. Of those, 72% are male, 28% are female.<sup>iv</sup>
- 53% of Promise Keeper men view pornography each week<sup>v</sup>
- 17% of all women struggle with pornography addiction<sup>vi</sup>

If we limit “purity” to include only physical acts, we neglect to recognize how cyber activities can destroy our mental, emotional, and spiritual integrity. To protect all aspects of sexual purity, limit cyber activities to interactions you wouldn’t mind everyone in your life knowing about.

**[sidebar #2 ends]**

---

<sup>i</sup> Adapted from *Every Woman’s Battle*, WaterBrook Press, 2003.

<sup>ii</sup> *No Mystery Left: Is the Easy Availability of Online Porn Leaving Kids Too Sex-Savvy?*  
[www.abnews.com](http://www.abnews.com). 18 October 2003, found at [www.nationalcoalition.org/stat.html](http://www.nationalcoalition.org/stat.html)

<sup>iii</sup> *My wife doesn’t care if I fool around online*, Leslie Miller. USA Today, 10 July 2000, found at [www.nationalcoalition.org/stat.html](http://www.nationalcoalition.org/stat.html)

---

<sup>iv</sup> TopTenREVIEWS, Inc., copyright 2004, found at  
[www.internetfilerreview.com/internet-pornography-statistics.html](http://www.internetfilerreview.com/internet-pornography-statistics.html)

<sup>v</sup> Ibid.

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid.