The Psychological Case for Chastity

1. By Steve Gilliland

For those still growing in faithfulness, there are strong reasons that argue …


A number of times I’ve been asked, “If a couple is in love and plans to marry, what’s wrong with their becoming sexually involved?”

To begin with, Latter-day Saints know that the Lord has spoken clearly, strongly, and repeatedly on this subject. Through his prophets he has indicated that premarital sexual relations “are an abomination in the sight of the Lord” (*Alma 39:5*), but that those who remain virtuous and keep the other commandments shall have their “confidence wax strong in the presence of God.” (*D&C 121:45.*)

The Lord gives us commandments because he knows what will bring us happiness, peace, joy, and fulfillment. President Spencer W. Kimball reminds us that he is not “an angry, cruel God who brings vengeance on people for not complying with His laws. … He organized a plan which was natural—a cause-and-effect program. It is inconceivable that God would desire to punish or to see His children in suffering. … But however he tries, a man cannot escape the consequences of sin. They follow as the night follows the day. Sometimes the penalties are delayed in coming, but they are sure as life itself.” (*The Miracle of Forgiveness*, pp. 140-41.) God has not detailed all the psychological and sociological reasons why we should be sexually abstinent until marriage. We know from history and experience, however, that fornication and adultery are spiritually harmful and that if the practice is widespread it is detrimental to nations and societies.

As I approach this question from a background of counseling and social psychology, I can assure all young people that my professional experiences continue to confirm the wisdom of premarital chastity.

**Serious effects upon our personalities**

First, the sexual experience is not a simple satisfaction of a physical need, like eating or drinking. Freud recognized that it has a very complex relationship with our entire personality. (*New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis.*) The prophets teach us that it is a beautiful means our Father in heaven has established to provide bodies for spirits. If used aright, procreation can elevate and sanctify: if abused, it will violate and degrade. Our use of this special power, and the processes associated with it, will have a great effect upon our self-concepts and upon our perception of ourselves as men or women.

It is generally accepted that those feelings of masculinity or femininity have great impact upon our personality. In the most intimate of all relationships, our self-doubts, our fears, and our feelings of adequacy are all affected. Intimacies outside the covenants of marriage affect our
self-image, which significantly affects our marital relationships.

Some of our current movies, magazines, and music further compound the problem by conditioning us to focus more upon our own sensual pleasure and less upon human feelings.

Those who indulge in immorality lose some of their capacity to relate to others on more intimate spiritual and emotional levels. President Kimball once explained: “When the unmarried yield to the lust that induces intimacies and indulgence, they have permitted the body to dominate and have placed the spirit in chains. It is unthinkable that anyone could call this love.” (Spencer W. Kimball, Faith Precedes the Miracle, p. 154.) From my experience in counseling, I have learned that what President Kimball has said is true. When a couple engage in premarital intimacies they act out of selfish interests (though they may neither recognize nor admit it), and when we act out of purely selfish interest, we begin to use people as things. The more we use people as things, the more we undermine our capacity to relate to others.

Because of the Vietnam War, we were bombarded for years with vivid television scenes of people being mutilated, tortured, and killed. At first, I was shocked and sickened, but it has become frighteningly clear to me that as time went by I was able to view the human carnage more and more with a dispassionate attitude. From this experience, I know that people can become accustomed, and then apathetic to things that should cause great concern. People have tolerated and then accepted as “just part of life” that which should offend their most basic human feelings. Some of our most violent motion pictures and TV shows have become the greatest moneymakers. Until now, I never understood how the Romans could come to enjoy seeing people fed to the lions.

Likewise, as we are bombarded with sensual, carnal stimuli that in years past embarrassed us, it becomes easier to ignore it or perhaps even accept it. In movies it has become so common that many persons can very dispassionately see immorality on the screen. Norman Cousins warned, “The danger is not that the exploitation of sex may create sex fiends, but that it may spawn eunuchs. … People who insist on seeing everything and doing anything run the risk of feeling nothing. … Our highest responses are being blunted without our knowing it.” (“See Everything, Do Everything, Feel Nothing.” Saturday Review, January 23, 1971, p. 31.)

I fear that, whether we realize it or not, if we engage in premarital sexual conduct we are using the other person as an object or defining him or her in terms of bodily functions or in terms of our own selfish needs instead of by his or her eternal value. This not only destroys meaningful, fulfilling relationships with them, but it also cuts us off from the most important relationship of all—that with our Father in heaven. When we disobey commandments, we sin against our relationship with our Father in heaven. We sin against people and our relationships with them. We sin against our own true nature as sons and daughters of Deity.
May hinder a developing relationship

One of the greatest dangers of indulgence and experimentation prior to marriage is that the relationship may then never go beyond to a more significant level. Why? Developing a meaningful relationship takes time and work. The results are not always predictable. In contrast, the sexual experience requires little time and effort. When conflicts need to be worked through, when important issues arise, it becomes far easier for the couple that have built their relationship on sensual pleasures to flee into physical intimacy than it is for them to face their problems. A couple that does this may never get to know each other on a deeper level.

A related problem is that focusing on physical intimacy tends to exaggerate the importance of that aspect of marriage. The physical is important but is only one of many important aspects of the marital relationship. If the focus gets frozen on one aspect, then the others may be ignored or at least neglected, making it difficult to build an enduring eternal relationship.

Many severe problems that could result in marital unhappiness could be dealt with in courtship, but when a couple focus on the physical level, they usually avoid those problems. This pattern of relating probably will not change drastically after marriage.

Sow seeds of discord

Another danger of premarital intimacies is that they may open a whole new series of issues that will hinder the relationship in its development.

Guilt is a primary issue. A person cannot always predict how he or she will feel afterwards, especially if one rationalizes feelings while progressing into physical intimacy. Yet the next day, while facing himself in the mirror, he or she will probably sense that something in the area of self-respect has been lost and feel less comfortable about the relationship. This guilt will be greatly heightened if the person adheres to values that oppose such premarital intimacies.

A frequently heard argument is that sexual indulgence is all right for “consenting adults.” The question they don’t ask is, “Why do the adults consent?” People frequently consent for the wrong reasons and foolishly do things that cause regret for the rest of their lives.

A second area of potential discord is the doubts that can taint the relationship for both parties, doubts that can continue for years: “Does he love me for what I am or just for the pleasure he receives?” “If he loves me, why doesn’t he respect my standards?” “Did she marry me because she loves me, or because she feels that no one else will have her?” “He says that I’m the only one, but is there someone else?” “Is she comparing me with someone else?”

Having spent many hours counseling married couples, I know that these doubts can have a poisonous effect upon marriage. The reasons are profoundly spiritual as well as psychological. Love is a wonderful gift from God, possibly the most centrally human emotion that we feel, and as such is attended by other spiritual gifts: the desire and willingness to be unselfish, to sacrifice for the other person, to show and express love. If, however, we express these feelings in wrong
ways, we make it impossible for the Holy Ghost to attend us. As he withdraws his influence, feelings of insecurity, irritation, and selfishness arise. Lacking one of the great sustaining, positive forces in our lives, we become trapped in our doubts and fears, make demands for reassurance that our partners are incapable of meeting, and become insensitive to their own needs. Nothing can destroy a relationship faster than this kind of atmosphere. Nothing can create this kind of atmosphere faster than premarital intimacies.

With the availability of contraceptives, some have said that no couple should worry about pregnancy, but the rate of unwanted pregnancies is skyrocketing, pressuring local government and private organizations to open abortion clinics to destroy unborn children. No one can measure the spiritual toll upon the father who permits his child to be destroyed. No one can measure the consequences for the girl who decides not to bear her child. The chaste couple does not face this problem.

A good foundation for marriage simply does not include premarital sexual experiences. In her book *Why Wait Till Marriage?* Evelyn M. Duvall summarizes some statistical data. Two researchers found that couples who became involved in premarital intimacies had more broken engagements than those who abstained; they also concluded that chastity made marriage adjustment easier for both partners. Another researcher found the highest marital happiness among couples who were virgins at marriage. (New York, Association Press, 1965, pp. 52-53.)

**Many engagements break up**

A couple may say, “Well, we’re going to get married. We’ll be the only ones who will ever share this relationship.” Yet many couples who have become physically involved with each other before marriage simply do not marry.

But some people rationalize that “since this is my one and only and we belong to each other forever, we are justified in getting involved a little early.” The disillusionment and fear that can come if your “one and only” decides to break the engagement, which can be overwhelming, is even more so if sexual intimacies have been shared. And may I here remind you that the Lord has forbidden such behavior even for those who have become engaged. People don’t “belong to each other forever” until the marriage vows are made.
You do not go crazy

The couple should ask themselves, “What do we lose by waiting?” Sex is not a basic need that has to be fulfilled. Even a proponent of free love says, “I don’t think anybody, except a very severely disturbed individual, thinks that he or she must have sex relations.” (‘Debate: Is Premarital Chastity Desirable?’ Sexual Behavior, June 1971, p. 51.) Many people have productive lives without ever becoming involved in physical relationships. But while we won’t go crazy by abstaining from these experiences, the violation of our values will often have negative effects upon our emotional balance. Conversely, psychological problems often motivate one to flee into physical intimacies. Many social scientists have found that those who have feelings of inadequacy have a greater tendency to seek premarital experiences than those who have higher feelings of self-esteem and social competence. (Lester A. Kirkendall and Roger W. Libbey, “Sex and Interpersonal Relationships,” in The Individual, Sex and Society, eds. Carlfred B. Broderick and Jessie Bernard, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1969, pp. 119-27.)

Another rationale is that some people say chastity is harder for them than for others. Don’t fool yourself. From my experience counseling those others, I have learned that each person has had to struggle to develop self-control. Some have made it easier on themselves by following the commandments, avoiding temptation, and doing all they can to maintain a close relationship with the Spirit of the Lord. That does not mean, however, that they did not have to cope with strong desires.

President David O. McKay, referring to these desires as “God-given,” emphasized that they should and can be controlled. “You are at that period of life in which your physical nature manifests itself, but you must also remember that God has given you, in that same period of life, powers of reasoning; he has given you judgment, and these for a divine purpose. Let reason and judgment be your guide—your balance.” (Improvement Era, February 1959, p. 78.)

“Compatibility” is a myth

Those who say you must have premarital experience to make sure you are physically compatible are misleading you.

Some ask, “But a few married persons are troubled by frigidity, impotence, or other problems. Wouldn’t they have been better off had they lived together prior to marriage?” Frankly, some “solutions” leave us worse off than the problems we are trying to avoid. I have counseled with a number of married couples facing this type of marital problem. Yes, they were troubled by the situation, but most of them felt that in spite of their problems, they were glad they committed their lives to each other. When some refused to take advantage of available professional help, even though I, as their bishop, recommended it, I suggested that their problem was basically a lack of love and commitment in the relationship—not sexual hangups.

It is a mistake to talk about the physical relationship as a chief cause of problems in marriage. Instead, the converse is almost invariably true: when a couple is having problems getting along, the cause is emotional and spiritual; sexual problems are but symptoms.
The ceremony makes a difference

I remember seeing a television vignette of a couple who decided to live together. The apartment manager said they could rent it for as long as they wanted to. Simultaneously, she said, “We want it for five years,” and he said “We want it for a week.” They were surprised at each other’s reaction and the relationship immediately began to cool. The contract was never signed. She expected a greater commitment than he was willing to give. A legal, public commitment to each other and to the Lord and to all those who witness the covenant does make a difference. Effective human relationships are based upon trust. Trust is based upon an exchange of commitments. One does not continue to grow in love for another over an extended period of time unless he decides to.

Prior to the commitment of marriage, no matter what is said, no matter how much reassurance is given, there is still uncertainty. “If it doesn’t work out, we can still break up.”

In marriage, on the other hand, a couple have a lifetime to build their relationship. They have covenanted that whatever happens, they will remain together.

Nothing important is lost by waiting, while everything is gained. A couple that use self-control in order to maintain their relationship enhance the respect and love they have for each other. As you wait to enter into that very sacred experience, under the covenants of marriage, you will find it far more beautiful, more meaningful, and more fulfilling.

What if you have not waited?

Is all lost if a couple, in a moment of uncontrolled passion, become less worthy? Certainly they may have to cope with many of the problems mentioned above as well as others unique to their situation. “Wickedness never was happiness.” (Alma 41:10)

However, repentance is a road back. C. S. Lewis reminds us: “I do not think that all who choose wrong roads perish; but their rescue consists in being put back on the right road. A wrong sum can be put right: but only by going back till you find the error and working it afresh from that point, never by simply going on. … If we insist on keeping Hell (or even earth) we shall not see Heaven: If we accept Heaven we shall not be able to retain even the smallest and most intimate souvenirs of Hell.” (The Great Divorce, New York, Macmillan, 1973, p. 6.)

Despite the ugliness of sin, forgiveness is possible. President Spencer W. Kimball has said, “Sometimes a guilt consciousness overpowers a person with such a heaviness that when a repentant one looks back and sees the ugliness, the loathsomeness of the transgression, he is almost overwhelmed and wonders, ‘Can the Lord ever forgive me? Can I ever forgive myself?’ But when one reaches the depths of despondency and feels the hopelessness of his position, and when he cries out to God for mercy in helplessness but in faith, there comes a still, small, but penetrating voice whispering to his soul, ‘Thy sins are forgiven thee.’” (Spencer W. Kimball,
Through confession to one’s bishop or branch president and sincere repentance, the individual places himself on the right road. Repentance is a condition whereby the Lord can help one cope with and even grow from the terrible problems he has brought into his life by violating the commandments. Alma’s advice to his unchaste son gives one both motivation and hope:

“And now, my son, I desire that ye should let these things trouble you no more, and only let your sins trouble you, with that trouble which shall bring you down unto repentance.

“O my son, I desire that ye should deny the justice of God no more. Do not endeavor to excuse yourself in the least point because of your sins, by denying the justice of God; but do you let the justice of God, and his mercy, and his long-suffering have full sway in your heart.” (Alma 42:29-30)

*Gospel topics: family, morality*