

Aim of lesson

To establish the Bible principles about sexual relationships and their place within marriage, and to prepare the young people to face the challenges involved in being different from their peers.

Bible background

Genesis 2:18-24; Proverbs 5; Matthew 19:3-15; 1 Corinthians 6:12-7:7; 2 Corinthians 6:14-18; Ephesians 5:21-33; 1 Peter 3:1-8

Preparation required

Think about your own relationships and marriage, including any difficulties and problems faced. It would be helpful to know whether any of the group are currently involved in 'serious' relationships, especially if these are with non-Christadelphians - in fact, the better you know the young people, the easier you will find this lesson, but there's not much you can do about that in a week.

You may well feel some apprehension about dealing with this subject, but try to be open and honest, recognising that we all have emotions and that problems in human relationships affect those with a Christian background as well as others. Emphasise that none of us is immune from difficulty and temptation, and that God understands our feelings better than we do ourselves.

It is of course essential that you should respect absolutely the confidentiality of anything the young people should tell you which they do not want to be widely known. If there is anything you think someone's parents should know, you can try to persuade the young person to tell them themselves, but you should never breach a confidence.

Decide whether you want the young people to write in their notes during the lesson. You may feel it more helpful to discuss the subject and encourage the young people to think on their own about the points in their notes.

The CSSU has published a leaflet on 'Sex and Relationships' which you may like to discuss with the young people; it may be helpful to give them each a copy.

Suggested outline of lesson

The origin and purpose of sex

Because sex belongs in marriage, much of the Bible's guidance about sexual relationships is found in the context of teaching about marriage. Begin with

Genesis 2:18,21-24 and explain that 'one flesh' is a scriptural euphemism for sexual intercourse. You may like to discuss, in passing, why it is that the phrase is used: having made two people from one, God then joins them together again - an indication that the relationship between a husband and wife is meant to be a union of mind and spirit as well as body.

Show the students that (i) sex, in the right place, is a good thing - God invented it! - (ii) that its place is in marriage, and nowhere else; (iii) marriage is first and foremost about companionship - not about physical pleasure, childbearing, or social custom, though all of those things are involved at a secondary level.

Erotic love is something to be enjoyed and celebrated in the context of marriage - the Song of Solomon is a love song as well as an allegory, and see Proverbs 5:18-19. The New Testament principles are set out in 1 Corinthians 7:1-5. Notice how the apostle stresses the importance of sex within marriage; it is important to satisfy the needs of a husband or wife; Paul recognises the strength of our sexual desires and of the temptations that are around us, and it is in this context that he writes 'since there is so much immorality, each man should have his own wife, ... come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control' (verses 2, 5 NIV).

The character of marriage

Marriage should be permanent - until death (Matthew 19:4-6; Romans 7:2; 1 Corinthians 7:39) or until the kingdom comes (Matthew 22:30). Ask if the students have been to a Christadelphian wedding where words like 'until death parts us - or the Lord returns' were used. One benefit of marriage is that it provides a stable, loving environment in which to bring up children (Deuteronomy 5:16; 6:6-7; Proverbs 1:8-9 and all of chapter 4; Ephesians 6:4; Hebrews 12:9-11). Perhaps significantly, the passage that shows Jesus' love for children (Matthew 19:13-15) follows directly after his confirmation of the permanence of marriage.

Marriage should be characterised by self-giving, forgiving, unconditional love - like God's love for his children. Read Isaiah 54:5-8 and refer to the analogy of Hosea (Hosea chapters 1-3), or to passages such as Jeremiah 3 and Ezekiel 16.

The roles of husband and wife are complementary, not the same; God has made men and women to be different from each other both physically and mentally.

The young people may not have heard the nursery rhyme about Jack Sprat and his wife:

Jack Sprat would eat no fat,
His wife would eat no lean;
And so between the two of them
They licked the platter clean.

It sounds a trivial piece of doggerel, but it is making a serious point. Jack Sprat and his wife sound incompatible, but in fact their differences complemented each other and together they made a great partnership.

Read Ephesians 5:21-33 and 1 Peter 3:1-8. Yes, there is an irreconcilable conflict with current thinking - but the leadership role which is given to husbands does not mean that women are inferior in the sight of God (Galatians 3:28). Note the context of mutual submission (Ephesians 5:21) and the awesome responsibility on husbands (Ephesians 5:25-28). There is a line in the song 'You needed me' which goes 'You put me high, upon a pedestal'; so should both husband and wife put each other.

For a believer, marriage and sexual union have a special significance, because they reflect the relationship between Christ and the church (Ephesians 5:22-33). Discuss the implications of Paul's words for believing (a) wives and (b) husbands.

Sex outside marriage

From the beginning, monogamy was the clear pattern laid down by God. 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one' (Genesis 2:24).

In later Old Testament times customs such as polygamy, arranged marriages, and the taking of concubines were tolerated, and even regulated in the law, but in the New Testament, monogamy is confirmed to be the clear pattern that God wishes us to follow - see 1 Timothy 3:2,12 and Titus 1:6.

Refer to the condemnation of sexual relations outside marriage in the Old Testament (e.g. Deuteronomy 22:13-29; Proverbs 2:16-19, 5:3-13, 7:1-27) and the New Testament, where the sanctity of marriage is emphasised (e.g. Matthew 19:3-9 and parallel passages; Hebrews 13:4) and sexual immorality is among the sins contrasted with the way of life of the believer (e.g. 1 Corinthians 6:9-11; Galatians 5:19-21).

Homosexuality, and 'same-sex marriages'

Homosexual practices are clearly condemned (Leviticus 18:22; 20:13; Romans 1:27; 1 Corinthians 6:9-10). Discuss the challenges, and the importance, of staying loyal to Bible teaching when many people view homosexual practices as normal, and homosexual relationships as of equal merit as heterosexual ones.

For believers, their relationship with God gives a special reason to resist immorality (1 Corinthians 6:18-20).

Relationships with non-believers

This is an important section - give the young people time to think about and discuss it carefully. The New Testament principle is that believers are to marry believers (1 Corinthians 7:39; 9:5).

Singleness may be a positive choice (1 Corinthians 7:8-9) or a necessity (Matthew 19:10-12). In general, marriage is beneficial and everyone benefits, but this is not always the case. Not all marriages work, and it should not be assumed that marriage is the only, or a guaranteed, way to happiness.

Relate the requirement to marry believers to the principle that relationships with husbands/wives are secondary to a believer's relationship with the Lord (Luke 14:26), and to the requirement to avoid being 'unequally yoked' (2 Corinthians 6:14-18). Since sexual union and marriage are primarily about companionship, the relationship will work best if the two people share the same principles of life, the same loyalty and the same goals. If a believer does not share the most important thing in life with his/her proposed partner, they do not have enough in common for the fullest commitment to one another. To pretend otherwise would be unfair to the believer, to the unbelieving partner (who is being asked to take second place to a Lord he/she does not acknowledge), to any children (who will be brought up in a household of divided loyalties) and above all, to the Lord Jesus.

The question of relationships with professing Christians of other persuasions may be raised. Treat this sensitively, but note the difficulties that a marriage between partners of different faiths may encounter. Indeed, some (for example on what to teach children) may be even more pronounced than in a marriage where only one partner has faith, because both may passionately believe different things.

Obviously, friendships with non-believers which stop short of commitment are entirely to be expected. But in fairness to all parties, the believer should be entirely open about his/her moral position - especially if the peer group environment is such that casual relationships are 'expected' to lead to physical sex.

The contrast with today's world

The contrasts between Bible teaching and contemporary morality are fairly obvious - marriage being seen as disposable, pre-marital and extra-marital sex as normal, and homosexual relationships as of equal legitimacy to heterosexual ones. Perhaps the fundamental error is that sex is seen as being for personal gratification, with other people often reduced to a means to serve that end. We should never treat others merely as source of personal gratification.

At the heart of true marriage is self-giving love. Sexual union is a symbol and an expression of this love, made in the context of a commitment to one another before God.

Some useful guidelines about relationships

Use your discretion as to how blunt you should be with your students, but the following guidelines may be helpful to them.

- Make your position clear at the start - be open about your faith early in a relationship. Don't ram your beliefs down a friend's throat, but don't apologise for them either.
- Don't expect to understand every last detail of why God commands what he does. Sometimes, it is difficult to see why commands that seem hard to obey are so important. But think. You will find it confusing just to work out your own emotions at times. It is just possible that God, who invented human love, who created your mind and designed you in the finest detail, may understand more than you do about the best way to live. If you don't understand it all, trust him, and follow his commands. Another thing to remember is that sleeping around brings its own problems, it isn't all fun.
- Beware the 'snowball effect' - the more you get emotionally involved with someone, the more difficult it is to stop. That's why countless people start by enjoying each other's company and spending time together, and almost without realising what's happening, go too far. Don't delude yourself that it will be easy to call a halt. Be forewarned and forearmed with a clear knowledge of Bible teaching and clear principles. To use a driving analogy, before you press the accelerator be sure you know when and where to find the brake.
- It helps if your social life involves, in large measure, people who share your convictions - but remember, even this is no guarantee against the 'snowball effect'.
- Don't be deluded into thinking that sex is always a great success that brings pleasure to both parties. Sometimes - often - it is, but it can also be frustrating and upsetting.
- Don't be deluded, either, into thinking that sex can be the basis of a long-term relationship. It can't. Sex can enhance a close friendship, but it can never create one.
- There is a third delusion. Don't be fooled into thinking that everyone in the world is sexually active except you. Sex is vastly over-discussed, and even those who are sexually active will so very often regret it later and wish that they had had the presence of mind and strength of character to have waited until they were older.
- Remember there is a very effective drug for switching off your moral caution and making it vastly more likely that you will do something you later regret. It's called alcohol: beware.
- The best guideline of all, in virtually any situation, is to ask, "What would Jesus do?" - remember he was 'tempted in every way, just as we are' (Hebrews 4:15 - presumably including sexual temptation). And even if you do mess it up, he is still there, and still loves you.

None of this should make us killjoys. The Bible's morality does not mean going around with dismal faces and serious expressions, using Bibles rather like offensive weapons. It does mean keeping our wits about us, remembering whose we are and whom we serve, and refusing to compromise on fundamental principles.

Relevance to our lives

Students may like to discuss ways in which it is necessary/possible to stand up for Bible principles in personal relationships. Some may like to relate the principles discussed to their own experience (though if there are current problems these might be best discussed privately, with a leader of the same sex, outside the class).

In certain countries, students' grandparents and great-grandparents may have made their stand for Christ, sometimes with great courage, on the issue of military service. Perhaps in this generation, the issue that divides young believers from their peers will not be service in war, but sexual relationships?

Prayer

Ask that God, who created sex and human love, may help us to use his gifts according to his will, and within his laws. Ask for his guidance in our emotional difficulties, for his forgiveness when we get it wrong, and for the wisdom to support one another in trying to obey him amid emotional turmoil.

Other suggestions for activities

- Discuss some 'problem situations' and how best to handle them. Alternatively, list some of the contrasts between the morality of the Bible and that of today's society.
- Tell the young people about the Song of Solomon, and suggest to them that they read it privately, using a version in which the different characters are indicated. The sensuality of the words, linked with the highest ideals of God's love for his people, make a beautiful combination.