

Selections From C.S. Lewis on “Chastity”

I. From: *Mere Christianity* (NY: Macmillan, 1952) - Book III -Chap. 5: “Christian Behaviour.”

Chastity is the most unpopular of the Christian virtues. *There is no getting away from it: the old Christian rule is, “Either marriage, with complete faithfulness to your partner, or else total abstinence.”* Now this is so difficult and so contrary to our instincts, that obviously either Christianity is wrong or our sexual instinct, as it now is, has gone wrong. One or the other. Of course, being a Christian, I think it is the instinct which has gone wrong.

...The biological purpose of sex is children.... But if a healthy young man indulged his sexual appetite whenever he felt inclined, and if each act produced a baby, then in ten years he might easily populate a small village. This appetite is in ludicrous and preposterous excess of its function (p 89).

Everyone knows that the sexual appetite, like our other appetites, grows by indulgence. *Starving men may think much about food, but so do gluttons; the gorged, as well as the famished, like titillations. ...You find very few people who want to eat things that really are not food or to do other things with food instead of eating it. In other words, perversions of the food appetite are rare. But **perversions of the sex instinct are numerous, hard to cure, and frightful** (p. 90).*

*...Modern people are always saying, “Sex is nothing to be ashamed of.” They may mean two things. They may mean “There is nothing to be ashamed of in the fact that the human race reproduces itself in a certain way, nor in the fact that it gives pleasure.” If they mean that, they are right. Christianity says the same. It is not the thing, nor the pleasure that is the trouble. ... Christianity is almost the only one of the great religions which thoroughly approves of the body—which believes that matter is good, that God Himself once took on a human body, that some kind of body is going to be given to us even in Heaven and is going to be an essential part of our happiness, our beauty, and our energy. Christianity has glorified marriage more than any religion...If anyone says that sex in itself, is bad, Christianity contradicts him at once. But of course, when people say, “Sex is nothing to be ashamed of,” they may mean **“the state into which the sexual instinct has now got is nothing to be ashamed of.”** If they mean that, I think they are wrong. I think it **is everything to be ashamed of** (p 91).*

*...I do not say you and I are individually responsible for the present situation. Our ancestors have handed over to us organisms which are warped in this respect: and we grow up surrounded by propaganda in favour of unchastity. There are people who want to keep our sex instinct inflamed in order to make money out of us. Because, of course, a man with an obsession is a man who has little sales resistance. **God knows our situation; He will not judge us as if we had no difficulties to overcome. What matters is the sincerity and perseverance of our will to overcome them.***

Before we can wish to be cured, we must want to be cured. Those who really wish for help will get it; but for many modern people even the wish is difficult. It is easy to think that we want something when we do not really want it. A famous Christian [Augustine] long ago told us that when he was a young man he prayed constantly for chastity; but years later he realized that while his lips has been saying, “ Oh Lord, make me chaste,” his heart had been secretly adding, “But please don’t do it just

yet." This may happen in prayers for other virtues too; but there are **three reasons why it is now especially difficult for us to desire-let alone to achieve- complete chastity.**

*In the **first place our warped natures, the devils who tempt us, and all the contemporary propaganda for lust, combine to make us feel that the desires we are resisting are so "natural," so "healthy," and so reasonable, that is it almost perverse and abnormal to resist them. Poster after poster, film after film, novel after novel, associate the idea of sexual indulgence with the ideas of health, normality, youth, frankness, and good humour. Now this association is a lie. Like all powerful lies, it is based on a truth- the truth ...that sex in itself (apart from the excess and obsessions that have grown up round it) is "normal" and "healthy," and all the rest of it. The lie consists in the suggestion that any sexual act to which you are tempted at the moment is also healthy and normal (p 92).***

*Now **this, or any conceivable view, and quite apart from Christianity, must be nonsense. Surrender to all our desires obviously leads to impotence, disease, jealousies, lies, concealment, and everything that is the reverse of health, good humour, and frankness. For any happiness, even in this world, quite a lot of restraint is going to be necessary; so the claim made by every desire, when it is strong, to be healthy and reasonable, counts for nothing. ... "[N]ature" (in the sense of natural desire) will have to be controlled anyway, unless you are going to ruin your whole life. The Christian principles are, admittedly, stricter than the others [e.g., the "hygienic" and "sociological" ones]; but then we think you will get help towards obeying them which you will not get towards obeying the others.***

*In the **second place, many people are deterred from seriously attempting Christian chastity because they think (before trying) that it is impossible. But when a thing has to be attempted, one must never think about possibility or impossibility. Faced with an optional question in an examination paper, one considers whether one can do it or not; faced with a compulsory question, one must do the best one can....[P]eople quite often do what seemed impossible before they did it. It is wonderful what you can do when you have to (p 93).***

We may be sure that perfect chastity- like perfect charity- will not be attained by any merely human efforts. You must ask for God's help. Even when you have done so, it may seem to you for a long time that no help, or less help than you need, is being given. Never mind. After each failure (p. 93), ask forgiveness, pick yourself up, and try again. Very often what God first helps us towards is not the virtue itself but just this power of always trying again. For however important chastity (or courage, or truthfulness, or any other virtue) may be, this process trains us in habits of the soul which are more important still. It cures our illusions about ourselves and teaches us to depend on God. We learn, on the one hand, that we cannot trust ourselves even in our best moments, and, on the other, that we need not despair even in our worst, for our failures are forgiven. The only fatal thing is to sit down content with anything less than perfection.

*...[P]sychology...teaches us that "repressed" sex is dangerous. But "repressed" ...does not mean "suppressed" in the sense of "denied" or "resisted". ...When an adolescent or an adult is **engaged in resisting a conscious desire**, he is not dealing with a repression nor is he in the least danger of creating a repression. On the contrary, **those who are seriously attempting chastity are more conscious, and***

*soon know a great deal about their own sexuality than anyone else...as a rat catcher knows rats or a plumber knows about leaky pipes. **Virtue—even attempted virtue—brings light; indulgence brings fog.***

*Finally, though I have had to speak at some length about sex, I want to make it as clear as I possibly can that **the centre of Christian morality is not here.** If anyone thinks that Christians regard unchastity as the supreme vice, he is quite wrong. **The sins of the flesh are bad, but they are the least bad of all sins. All the worst pleasures are purely spiritual:** the pleasure of putting other people in the wrong, of bossing and patronising and spoiling sport, and backbiting (p 94): the pleasures of power, of hatred. **For there are two things inside me, competing with the human self which I must try to become.** They are the Animal self, and the Diabolical self. **The Diabolical self is the worse of the two.** That is why a cold, self-righteous prig who goes regularly to church may be far nearer to hell than a prostitute. But, of course, it is better to be neither (p. 95).*

II. From: Letter (March 6, 1956) to a Mr. Masson, Wade Collection, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL; as quoted in Leanne Payne, *The Broken Image* (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1981):

*...C. S. Lewis ...answering a query about the **nature of the habit of masturbation and its effects on those who come to “love the prison.”***

*For me the **real evil of masturbation would be that it takes an appetite which, in lawful use, leads the individual out of himself to complete (and correct) his own personality in that of another (and finally in children and even grandchildren) and turns it back; sends the man back into the prison of himself, there to keep a harem of imaginary brides.** And this harem, once admitted, works against his ever getting out and really uniting with a real woman. For **the harem is always accessible, always subservient, calls for no sacrifices or adjustments, and can be endowed with erotic and psychological attractions which no real woman can rival.** Among those shadowy brides **he is always adored, always the perfect lover; no demand is made on his unselfishness, no mortification ever imposed on his vanity.** In the end, **they become merely the medium through which he increasingly adores himself.** ...[I]t is not only the faculty of love which is thus sterilized, forced back on itself, but the faculty of the imagination. The true exercise of imagination, in my view, is (a) To help us to understand other people, (b) To respond to, and, some of us, to produce art. But has also a bad use: to provide for us, in shadowy form, a substitute for virtues, successes, distinctions, etc. which ought to be sought outside in the real world—e.g., picturing all I'd do if I were rich instead of earning and saving. Masturbation involves this abuse of imagination in erotic matters (which I think is bad in itself) and thereby encourages a similar abuse of it in all spheres. After all, almost the main work of life is to come out of our selves, out of the little, dark prison we are all born in. Masturbation is to be avoided as all things are to be avoided which retard this process. **The danger is that of coming to love the prison** (p. 91-92).*