

A Parent's Guide to
PURITY

axis



The proof of spiritual maturity is not how pure you are but awareness of your impurity. That very awareness opens the door to grace.

—Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing about Grace?*

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Is our pursuit of purity tainting our pursuit of Christ?

When Jane was a little girl, her grandmother Alba handed her a beautiful white flower. They admired its perfection together, noting its delicate beauty. Yet Alba instructed Jane to crumple the flower in her hand until it was barely recognizable, then said, “Now try to make it look new again”—an obviously impossible task. When Jane looked at her with confusion and sadness, she said, “That’s right. You can never go back. And that’s what happens when you lose your virginity! You can never go back.”

If that sounds extreme, it’s because it is; it’s from the CW’s show [Jane the Virgin](#). Sadly, though, it’s very similar to the message our kids hear from the Church today: “Once you give your virginity away, you’re tainted and irreparably damaged, and you have ruined your sexual future.” But it’s all wrong. Based in shame, regret, and fear, this approach emphasizes outward conformity over inward obedience. Though the original goal ([being holy](#) and pure) is right and good, our methods, it turns out, are less than ideal.

As our kids become preteens, then teenagers, and eventually adults, we Christian parents desire to equip them with knowledge, truth, and the ability to navigate the sexual landscape. How to do just that is a hot topic, particularly in the evangelical Protestant world. From purity rings and purity balls to books and bracelets, an entire *culture* has developed. But often, it doesn’t seem to have worked. Parents are left wondering where they went wrong and why their children have abandoned sexual purity altogether. Young adults feel crushed and wounded by how their sexuality was treated, [often citing](#) what’s come to be known as “purity culture” as one of the main reasons they’re disenchanted with the Church. So where do we go from here? How can we take the good from the conversations we’ve been having, reject what is wrong, and raise our kids with a desire to be pure before God?

Where can we go wrong when talking about purity?

Easy answer? Lots of ways. But let’s also remember that the goal isn’t to bash everything

that's come before now and start from scratch. Many people have made good efforts in this area. We need to build on what's been handed to us while returning to the true Gospel and how that informs all areas of our lives, including our sexuality. So here are some ways we can err in our approach.

Overemphasizing It.

[One blogger writes](#) that there are two common lies we hear in the purity conversation: “The first [lie] comes from our culture, and it tells us that **sex outside of marriage isn't a big deal**. The second is from the Church, and it tells us that **sex outside of marriage is the biggest deal of all the deals ever**. One allowed me to give it away freely, convinced I would carry no burden. The other forced me to carry a spirit-crushing load.”

Downplaying It.

We can guarantee that the predominant message teens will hear from the world and their classmates is that premarital sex in all forms is normal and not a big deal. The sad thing about this is that it might sound good, **but it isn't true**. When we downplay the significance of sex and sexuality, we let them get whisked up in the current of the world, which, despite being what they might want to hear, isn't actually good news.

Turning to Legalistic, Fear-Driven Behavior Management.

The way the Church has reacted has not always been gracious or effective. It has mostly looked like behavior management in the form of pledges, purity rings, purity balls, and lots of fear-filled, one-sided lectures. There are *great* intentions behind some of these things, but ultimately they convey that once you break your pledge, you're out, done, tainted. You've lost something (your virginity) that has somehow disproportionately become the biggest mark of being a “good Christian.”

As part of that, we've also turned modesty into a list of rules. For example, the organization formerly known as Secret Keeper Girl (now True Girl) had, until recently, a clothing test called “Truth or Bare,” with rules involving lifting your arms and bending in certain ways, testing for whether inappropriate body parts might be showing when doing so (including—no joke—“future cleavage” for the younger ones in the crowd). Shame isn't a good motivator. Focusing only on outward actions doesn't address lust of the heart (more on this later).

Treating Relationships as Dangerous.

If the basic message the Church is conveying is “don't play with fire,” essentially what

we're saying is that our bodies and the bodies of the opposite sex are dangerous fire, rather than beautiful masterpieces created good and designed to experience pleasure and enjoyment. Proper relationships with the opposite sex lead to flourishing and freedom. Avoiding interaction and even dating is not a good solution.

Putting the Burden on Girls.

Many “purity” books focus on the female side of keeping oneself pure: *And the Bride Wore White*, *Secret Keeper Girl*, and *Authentic Beauty*, to name a few. In the related modesty conversation, it is usually up to girls to dress a certain way to protect their male peers from falling into sin, conveying that girls are just body parts, dangers to be avoided if one wants to remain pure.

But it doesn't stop at adolescence. We perpetuate this as adults in the name of propriety. For example, the “[Billy Graham Rule](#)” (or the “Mike Pence Rule” in its more recent iteration), which is followed by many (usually male) Christian leaders, says that women and men must never be alone together. Not in a car, not having a business meeting over coffee, not a woman being counseled by her pastor, not even in an elevator. It sounds wise at first—guarding our hearts and establishing boundaries are good things—but think of what it's really saying. Writer and priest Tish Harrison Warren [explains](#):

This rule, in its most pristine form, renders male-female friendships impossible. However unintentionally, it communicates to women that they are fundamentally dangerous...It shuts down relationships to protect oneself from the wreckage of sin and puts the burden of that primarily on others—namely on women, who are less welcome in male spaces.

Jesus lovingly interacted with the Samaritan woman at the well, even asking her for a drink. He defended the woman caught in adultery, commended Mary Magdalene for her lavish anointing of His feet, healed an unclean woman, taught and disciplined Mary, and scandalously chose women to be the first to witness His resurrection. There are many reasons to be careful and have boundaries in male-female relationships, but Jesus shows us in His interactions with women—which were considered radical and outside of what was appropriate at the time—that there's something bigger (love) at stake, and that fearful self-protection isn't the only way.

Acting Like Modesty Doesn't Matter.

Just because one extreme is wrong doesn't mean the other is right. Taking the burden off of girls doesn't mean telling them they can do and wear whatever they want. There's

still a way to act and dress that is loving to other people and to oneself. It's not either/or with the responsibility falling on either guys or girls. It's both/and. Guys don't get a free pass to flirtatiously lead girls on and casually play around with their hearts, or to let their physical impulses run rampant because they're somehow beyond their control. Sexual ethics and theology need to be taught equally to both sons and daughters.

Being Results-Oriented.

Another way we go wrong is by being results-oriented. This is where we say, "If you do this, then you'll get this." *Christianity Today* editor Katelyn Beaty refers to this as the "[sexual prosperity gospel](#)": If you wait to have sex until you get married, then your sex life will be perfect for the rest of your life. The more serious you are and the better your standards, the better things will go for you. It's all about your performance and behavior. Or we focus too much on statistics, like STI rates or how marriages have a better chance of lasting when you don't cohabitate beforehand. These are great pieces of information, but they're not the real *why* behind choosing right living. It's not just about getting good things for yourself. And it's not just about avoiding consequences that will hurt you. **It's about choosing Christ above all else and giving Him every part of ourselves—including our purity—because of what He's already done for us.**

Treating Marriage as the Finish Line.

Guess what? Purity doesn't end when you get married! So acting like somehow we just have to get kids to their wedding day and the struggle is over is naive and unhelpful, setting them up with the wrong expectations and leaving them vulnerable to failure. Our need for chaste living is lifelong. There's also a tendency to make an idol out of marriage. If marriage is the finish line, what do we tell those who don't ever get married? What if they really want to be married? What if they've done all the right things? If the goal is to remain sexually pure so that there can be good sex later, but the only context for sex is marriage, then essentially we're saying you can only live a good life if you're married, which isn't true!

Being Too Serious.

Also, can we just stop taking this so *seriously*? It's not that it's not important, but the seriousness is probably leading to a lack of openness in conversations. It gives it a taboo feel, and we end up only having one sex conversation with our kids. It also blows it out of proportion and makes it the *ultimate* thing, when it's just not. Lightheartedness

means it can come up at the dinner table, that we can not take ourselves too seriously, and that we can laugh at ourselves as we bumble along on this journey.

Asking the Wrong Questions.

Most of us ask how we can get our kids to avoid sex, rather than asking how we can encourage them to live faithfully before God. Blogger [Jamie says](#):

We've done a really bad job of teaching about sex in the Church. Our approach has been to shame girls for having it and shame boys for wanting it. And when the smart kids ask, 'Why wait?' we shrug our shoulders and say, 'Because the Bible says.' Then we give the girls a purity ring and we give the boys nothing and we cross our fingers and hope they'll cross their legs.

Joshua Harris wrote a famous—or perhaps now infamous—book called *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* in the '90s at the ripe old age of 21. Recently, he began to humbly reconsider some of what he wrote in that book and how it has negatively affected and even hurt people. He came out with a TED talk called “[Strong Enough to Be Wrong](#),” and we highly recommend it—not just for what he has to say about the purity conversation, but for how he models so well what it looks like to walk humbly and apologize for ways we might have mislead people and for our own mistakes. His longer documentary [I Survived I Kissed Dating Goodbye](#) is a fantastic exploration of where the purity conversation has been and where we're headed.

He believes that evangelical Christians have used sex to sell abstinence, and that the desire to make the message as effective as possible has mislead people. “It's not who am I in relationship to God as a sinner, it becomes ‘Do I have a virgin badge?’” But, as he says in the documentary, “Just because something sells doesn't mean it's giving people what they really need...people don't even want what they really need.”

Even since this Guide was originally written, Harris has [announced](#) that he not only is divorcing his wife, but has also decided to lay aside Christianity in general. This is somewhat surprising considering what he has written and spoken of in his documentary, *but most definitely indicates the complicated nature of where we have been and where we are going.*

What challenges are teens facing in this environment?

With constant access to technology and social media, teens are being disproportionately influenced by peers. Whether real or fabricated, the message they're hearing is that everyone is having sex and that it's totally normal. Culture tells them to do what feels good, and if you're authentic to yourself, you have an almost moral obligation to do what fulfills you in the moment. You find meaning within yourself—not in some externally imposed standard. Even if teens know what's right and have a desire to live out their sexuality faithfully and in a way that honors God, actually doing so is difficult, and it feels like the odds are stacked against them.

What exactly do you mean when you say “purity”?

In order to better understand purity, we need to also understand its opposite and the things that inhibit us in our search for purity. Having correct definitions of these things will help us and our kids tremendously as we strive to be pure and holy before God. In addition, many words we use have taken on certain stigmas or connotations beyond what's communicated in the definition and historical understanding of the word.

One broad category that often comes up is **lust**. We know it's something we should avoid, but what exactly is it? Blogger Emily Maynard defines it [this way](#), while reminding us that lust isn't *only* about sex:

Lust dehumanizes a person in your own heart and mind. It is the ritual taking, obsessing, and using someone else for your own benefit rather than valuing that person as an equal image-bearer of God. Lust is forming people in your own image, for your own purposes, whether for sexual pleasure, emotional security, or moral superiority... Lust certainly can have a sexual component, but when we reduce it merely to sexual reactions, we miss out on God's heart for all people: infinite value.

Notice the heart issue here that goes beyond mere sexual impulses. That's why, when we try to reduce this conversation to actions (refraining from sex outside of marriage,

dressing “appropriately,” etc.), something is missing. Jesus did not limit adultery to only outward action; rather, adultery (or any action we take) is acting on what has already happened inwardly. It’s important to have self-control over our desires and impulses, but the fact that we have those desires and impulses need to be addressed, too.

Modesty has historically focused on inner humility and dignity, but has now come to be focused on the way *women* dress. The responsibility falls wholly on the person being lusted after (nearly always the woman) and reduces virtue to rules about what specific items of clothing are acceptable or unacceptable. While the culture might tell girls to attract boys by using their bodies, Christian modesty culture tells them to make sure to use their bodies to prevent attraction. Abi Bechtel [writes](#):

Christian modesty culture says that women’s bodies are not only inherently sexual, but inherently sexual at men; and that men will sexualize women’s bodies unless women take active steps to mitigate their inherent sexuality by viewing themselves through the male gaze and covering up anything that might entice a man to “stumble.”

In addition, this topic can become quite Americanized and rarely acknowledges cultural differences. Is a Haitian woman sinning because she doesn’t wear a bra? What if she can’t even afford one? Some want to react to issues within modesty culture and say, “Do what you feel like. Dress how you want. Those people are crazy and oppressing us with their standards. Men can deal with it. Dress for yourself, not them.” But that’s clearly not the answer, either. There doesn’t appear to be room in the conversation as it stands for nuances and ambiguity, for wrestling and gray areas. But we need to make room.

Purity is a word with good intentions and has become a sort of brand of its own, with its own particular culture and practices. What seems to often be lacking is an emphasis on purity of heart, which is replaced by an overemphasis on outward behavior. The ultimate goal seems to be getting through the teenage/young adult years unscathed by certain defiling actions. If you can do that, you’re good. If you can’t, you’re bad. The safest way to do this is to try to shut off desire and sexual attraction as much as possible or, at least, to hide it. But true purity has more to do with love and less to do with a good reputation. It’s a lifelong pursuit of Christ, not a pursuit of standards we feel we must live up to.

Chastity is the word we’re really looking for, and it’s a virtue that has often gotten lost

and thrown by the wayside, but it needs to be brought back. It's a beautiful picture of sexuality redeemed, caught up in God's bigger redemption story. It's *not* becoming less sexual, [but rather](#) having "our sexual energies, intentions, and daydreams properly channeled." It's a "maturity, human and sexual, that fully respects others... a more life-giving love." It's neither selfishly focused on meeting only our own needs nor deadening our senses out of fear of immorality. It's not self-shaming, but is often self-denying, "[preserving the self in order to love.](#)"

Chastity is a purity of heart that we cannot achieve by our own efforts (more on that later), but it means that as sexual, gendered beings we are in right relationship with God, others, and ourselves. It's the same love but expressed differently in different situations and contexts in which we find ourselves (friendships, romantic relationships, etc.). It isn't just "no"; it's also *very much* "yes" in the right times and places. It isn't a shameful standard to fall short of but a virtuous beauty to aspire to, even as we often fall short. We tend to be all or nothing, pass or fail. We've lost some of the notion of that sort of journey toward something that's difficult to achieve yet still worth our effort. True chastity is rooted in the Gospel.

How does the Gospel inform the purity conversation?

Problems arise when we try to take things into our own hands, when we try to control what is not ours to control, and when we live in fear of what might or might not happen if we don't do everything right. What we really need is to return to the true Gospel and how that informs the way we approach sexuality and purity. The Gospel is never what we do to please God or earn His favor, it is always what God—the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—has done, is doing, and has promised to do for us, His beloved people.

[The Chastity Project](#) has some great ideas on chastity. But, as other organizations of its type, it might be asking the wrong questions sometimes. For example, there's a whole section of the website dedicated to the topic: "How to Stay Pure." We hate to burst bubbles, but...we can't. The kind of purity that God calls us to goes far beyond virginity and our ability. It's a much higher standard than we want to believe, and it's impossible for humans to live up to! *Only God* can make you and keep you pure.

Purity is a wonderful thing to strive for, but when our kids stumble (and they will, just as we did and still do), it's so important for them to know that they're caught by love and forgiveness. You (and your teen) are first beloved by God, no matter your sin and the wrongs you've committed, and behavior should flow from that belovedness and rescue. It must be in that order because we cannot save ourselves. **We are made pure not because of what we did or didn't do right, but because of Jesus' saving work on our behalf. Anything else is a false gospel, and false gospels offer false hope.**

In [Exodus 19](#), God tells Moses to remind the people of His saving work in Egypt. God says that if the Israelites obey and keep His commands, they'll be blessed. The people respond by saying, "We will do everything the Lord has said" (19:8). But, to no surprise, they can't. Yet God doesn't ultimately withhold blessing from them because He knows that flawed humans cannot achieve the perfect standards He has set.

Often we put the burden on ourselves (and our teens) to make ourselves pure by our own actions. The story from Exodus is reminiscent of modern-day pledge cards. A pledge card is well-intentioned (and a good case could be argued for making a commitment of that type), but it could just be setting up our children for failure. Purity and righteousness do not come from our ability or inability to make good on our commitment to remain sexually abstinent before marriage. But guess what? That's *good news*. The Gospel says that we cannot wash ourselves and make ourselves clean, but there's someone else who can: Jesus. He stepped in and made a way where we failed. Will we reap blessings when we choose to live God's way? Of course! That's how He designed it, as His laws are for our good. But there is no one pure but Him, and His blood alone is what makes us [white as snow](#).

We can't take the purity conversation and try to sprinkle some Gospel in. Instead, the Gospel must inform how we view, approach, and talk about purity. And it shows us that purity is a both a gift *and* a virtue. **We are given purity; we can't earn it.** And then, as a virtue, we aspire to purity in our actions and beliefs, out of gratitude for the gift we've been given.

Right now, the dominant purity conversation says: "You should feel shame and guilt if your kid has sex before marriage because it shows that you're a bad parent." But that isn't what the Gospel tells us *at all*. It says that we are not in charge of saving our kids or making them who they need to be. Our goal as parents is to love God, others, and

ourselves and to teach our kids to do the same in both success and failure, strength and weakness. God doesn't want right actions; He wants your heart—a heart that, through His gentle and firm molding and leading, will learn to *desire* to act rightly and love the right things. **Forcing behavior without a surrendered heart is futile.**

On the other hand, it's absolutely *not* the Gospel to say that how we live doesn't matter. God is redeeming and cares about every area of life, including our sexuality. His love kindly invades every corner of ourselves and our worlds. And He is calling us into greater freedom, beauty, and flourishing in every one of those areas. Those whose parents taught them to be legalistic about purity will be in danger of reacting too strongly by going the completely opposite direction, putting too little emphasis on it with their own kids. Obviously, we don't want our kids to be legalistic, but we also can't err on the other side and not encourage them to seek to live upright, God-honoring lives. We can't neglect to define what sin is or to remember how serious it is. (These two different viewpoints are illustrated quite starkly by recent star of ABC's *The Bachelorette* Hannah Brown and [her clash](#) with suitor Luke Parker over her decision to have sex with other contestants while on the show. Though Brown is correct that Jesus still loves her despite her decisions, both her licentiousness and Parker's condemning legalism are wrong.)

So how can I be realistic about purity?

Remember that your kids are not exceptionally bad because they struggle with this (and they do, whether they tell you about it or not). We don't naturally want what's best for ourselves. Our desires—yours *and* theirs—are twisted.

Also, we need to assume the best of our kids. When we assume they're trying hard to live life well, even if they end up drawing different conclusions than us about what's acceptable in sexuality, we lift the burden of shame. God's love longs for His beloved to return, and that's the posture we want to have as parents, rather than isolating or shaming our children. It's hard territory to navigate, this is certain, which is why we have to depend on God for wisdom in our parenting and in our own actions. It isn't just our kids who struggle; it's us, too.

Your heart may break if your teen tells you they had sex, but praise God that they felt

the freedom to tell you! And that isn't the end of the journey. Go beyond the pass-fail, black-and-white mentality and keep walking, talking, and praying with them. What it comes down to is that it isn't about rules, it's about a relationship with our Maker and Creator, who is the source of all goodness and flourishing. It is through knowing the heart of God *more* deeply that we discover how to live. We find that we have more value, not less. The things of earth don't "[grow strangely dim](#)" as the song claims, but much more clear, when we turn our eyes upon Jesus. We can't do this for our kids, but we can keep pointing them back to this source.

My kid doesn't seem to be struggling in this area, so do I need to talk about it with them?

We can miss God by doing all the wrong things, but we can just as easily miss Him by doing all the *right* things for the *wrong* reasons. And when we or our kids put purity and virginity on a pedestal, it becomes an idol, something that can keep us from recognizing our constant need for Jesus because either we pursue virginity *instead of* Him, or we think God owes us because we've done everything right.

We see this effect in the difference between the older brother and younger brother in the [story of the prodigal son](#). The rebellious younger brother ends up getting most of the praise and attention, while the older brother looks on with jealousy. He had always done the "right" thing, so where was his great reward? It's easy to focus on the obvious sin of the younger and neglect that the older has heart issues, too. The older brother shows us that striving for goodness can create a prideful heart. The Gospel doesn't say, "Mess up and you're out." *And it also doesn't say, "Do it right and you're in."* Our kids may struggle with inner pride, even though there are no huge, glaring, urgent issues to address.

There's a danger in allowing our kids to believe that their "right" behavior will pay off and lead to lasting happiness. In [one session](#) of [True Love Waits](#), Lifeway offers a useful perspective:

In dealing with the area of sexual purity as it relates to abstinence from sex until marriage, I have witnessed some who held to a radical pursuit of purity prior to marriage and then fell into adultery later on in marriage. They never dealt with

the pride in their hearts that took shape in the form of legalism. While these young people had a genuine heart to please God and save sex for marriage, their commitment to virginity took priority over their desire for God Himself. They were pursuing the appearance of purity when they should have been pursuing Jesus. As a result, they began to drift. Eventually they found themselves unable to live up to their own standards—they had made virginity into an idol.

This isn't to scare us and draw us back into fear-filled grasping for control, it's just something to be aware of. In his [Theology of the Body](#), Pope John Paul II distinguishes between the idea of ritual purity—i.e. an external change of actions—and purity of heart—i.e. actual heart change. **It's essential to have conversations with our kids that steer them away from thinking that their success and good behavior could save them.**

How do I keep my kids from having sex before they're married?

A good question. We don't want our kids to have sex outside of the right context because we know how sacred sex is and how life-giving it can be when done according to God's design. But that question actually doesn't get to the root of the issue. So instead, let's start asking, "How do I cast a beautiful vision of purity, sexuality, relationships, and marriage?"

Teens don't just need to be told what not to do—chances are, they've gotten that talk a time or two already. Instead, we need to show them a beautiful picture of marriage and sex that will capture their imaginations. The Ten Commandments aren't just a list of don'ts; they all have positive implications of what it means to live the good life. Likewise, when it comes to sex, we can't just tell teens, "Don't don't do this" or "avoid this." That's like telling a toddler, "Don't hit your sister!" but never showing them how to be kind to her. Instead of harping on the list of things your child is allowed or not allowed to do sexually, what if we teach them how to love all of the people around them well? We can show them how to cherish and respect the humanity of each and every person they encounter, including themselves.

Lust stems from lack, from the fall, from the alienation of physical and spiritual, and as a

result, we feel a deep need that we try to fill. We try to fill it with good things, sure, but idolatry never ends well. Yet Jesus has reunited physical and spiritual in Himself, and now we can share in the love of the Trinity—the love that truly fulfills—once again. Teens need to hear that sex is rooted in love, the Trinity kind of love, not in self-fulfillment. Lust means you don't give, you only take. What is the only context in which we can fully give? Covenantal love. Faithful love. [Hesed love](#). Jealous love of the right kind.

We sometimes put sex on one end of the spectrum and self-denying holiness on the other, as though sex itself is indulgent at best or licentious at worst. Self-denial is necessary, but we're missing something when we act like it's self or Jesus. That's actually a false dichotomy. It's not self or Jesus; it's self *in* Jesus. We are in Christ. He has joined His life to ours. We are no longer our own. This is exciting, not suffocating! Realizing we are not our own actually brings freedom. We need our desires to be purified and trained and directed, not to go away completely. Jesus purposefully came in the flesh because the flesh is not bad. Our final goal isn't disembodiment from our desires and impulses. Jesus came to redeem the flesh, to model a life lived to God's glory. It's both/and, not either/or. It's not obeying God or having a good satisfying life. **Obeying God and submitting to Him is the good life.**

Is anyone really offering a compelling reason NOT to have sex before marriage? *Why* do kids think it's not worth waiting? What compelling reason can we give teens for wanting to actually wait to have sex until they're married? If sex is good, why should they postpone it? Paraphrasing [a sermon](#) by Pastor Ken Roberston, here are some thoughts about sex and why those questions matter.

- Sex is an icon that is so closely intertwined with the reality of our relationship with God that it's the first piece of creation we exchange for the Creator. It's a powerful image of that union.
- This is why God created boundaries around sex: It has such power to point us toward or away from God, to reveal Him or obscure Him. It's a symbol, a mirror of deeper reality.
- If sex doesn't have life-giving boundaries, then it overflows its banks and causes great harm. For example, sex with ourselves is pleasure in isolation, but it is meant to be in relationship. In addition, pornography objectifies and uses people, but God never uses us.
- **Sex outside of marriage promises intimacy, but intimacy requires safety, and safety requires permanence. You're not safe if you can be dropped at**

the end of a bad day. And that's not the kind of intimacy that Jesus gives us.

Marriage symbolically and powerfully represents God's covenantal, faithful, sacrificial love for His bride, the church. As God has always existed in relationship with Himself—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—He likewise has designed His people to experience the world in the context of relationship, and has from the beginning designed us to flourish in the context of families, not just as individuals. And indeed, life flourishes and multiplies and bears fruit through this relationship He has ordained between man and woman.

Kids need to hear early on that sex isn't purely about their own fulfillment and satisfaction and pleasure. Otherwise they'll just go looking for it from anywhere and anyone without the right context. Beautiful, life-giving sex is a giving, sacrificing, generous kind of love, and that happens most fully when we look to God to define what that looks like.

We also need to treat the body as a beautiful, glorious thing, *not* something shameful. Early Christians seemed to get this, as they crafted many yonic (vagina-shaped) baptismal fonts, symbolizing very literally the re-birth that happens as we are plunged under the water in baptism. "The ancients apparently were not only comfortable with the reality of female anatomy but considered it sacred enough to actually fuse it with their very sacraments," [writes](#) Tish Harrison Warren.

Self-control, as much as we can instill it in teens early on, is a gift. It's not just scaring someone into not doing something dangerous (having sex), it's training in all areas of life to control our impulses and desires. When they can do this before marriage, it will help them for a lifetime. Being able to reign in our feelings and desires actually gives us freedom to love, because we're not merely taking but actually able to give. It is [for freedom](#) that Christ has set us free! Sin is what is actually oppressing us. Paul said it beautifully when [he wrote](#):

You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself."

We don't just fast to deny ourselves of something good; we abstain to make room *for something better*. This needs to be communicated! Chastity requires hope in the way things should be so that you press on even when it's hard. As Sally Lloyd Jones says in *Thoughts To Make Your Heart Sing*, "...when we run from God, we run away from everything that makes us alive and free. We run away from our own happiness."

Practical tips

- Open up about your own personal history with purity. If there is anything you need to work through before speaking with your child, talk with your spouse or a trusted friend who can walk you through it. And remember, we need not share everything from our past with our kids, but if the story is helpful and appropriate, we want to invite our kids into that space with humility so they can see God’s redemption in our lives.
- Get to know single people. Encourage these single people. Be interested in what they do. Ask for their opinions on things. Take them seriously. Don’t just use them as babysitters. Show your kids that people matter whether they’re married or not, that life is fulfilling whether or not they find “the one.”
- Get over the taboo-ness of sex. If you don’t talk about it, someone else will. It’s part of life, a good part of life, and even if you don’t have it all figured out, keep talking.
- You’re going to see one side or the other—either legalistic purity or no standards at all—as more dangerous. Whichever side you feel is more dangerous, just be aware that you’ll naturally err too far to the other side. Keep learning, keep being humble, keep being curious.

Final thoughts

Though navigating the current landscape can be difficult, don’t give up having good conversations and pressing in. God is at work through you, whether you feel capable or not. He has given YOU to be your kids’ parent, and that was no mistake.

Related Axis Resources

- [The Culture Translator](#), a **free** weekly email that offers biblical insight on all things teen-related
- [30 Days to Redefining the Sex Talk](#)
- [A Parent’s Guide to Modesty](#)

- [A Parent's Guide to Pornography](#)
- [Pornography Conversation Kit](#)
- Check out axis.org for even more resources!
- If you'd like access to all of our digital resources, both current and yet to come, for one low yearly or monthly fee, check out the [All Axis Pass!](#)

Additional Resources

- [The Theology of the Body](#) by Pope John Paul (“beginners” version [here](#))
- “[Books that Changed My Mind](#),” Joshua Harris (in case you’re interested in knowing more about Harris’ journey, this is a list and summary of the books that helped him reconsider the message of *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*)
- [Authentic Intimacy](#) blog, Dr. Juli Slattery
- [The Sacred Search](#) by Gary Thomas
- “[What the Church Is Getting Wrong about Purity](#),” Katie Emmerson (video)
- “[Sexual Desire and Lust: Are They the Same?](#)” My Chain Are Gone
- “[Whoever Looks at a Woman with Lust’: Misinterpreted Bible Passages](#),” Jason Staples (very academic analysis of what Jesus meant by “lust” in Matthew 5:27-28)

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A Parent's Guide to **PURITY**

Recap

- We as a Church have inherited a tricky purity culture and conversation.
- God's design for sexuality and relationships is bigger and more beautiful than we realize. Purity is more than simply virginity; it's a lifestyle centered on Christ.
- There's been a lack of balance in the purity conversation. Teens either hear from the Church that it's the biggest deal ever or from the culture that it's really no big deal at all, that they should just do whatever makes them happy.
- We often try to push purity through legalistic behavior management and by viewing relationships as dangerous.
- Much of the burden has been placed on girls to dress and act according to proper standards, but this renders women powerless and men vulgar animals who must be protected from such temptations. Both guys and girls have lessons to learn in purity.
- Instead of blaming our teens for the "anything goes" culture they're in today, let's also take some responsibility for it ourselves, not hanging our heads in shame, but knowing that we have room to grow as well.
- *Only God* can make and keep us pure. And we are made pure not because of what we did or didn't do right, but because of Jesus' saving work on our behalf.
- Despite what we're told, we shouldn't feel like we're bad parents if our kids have sex before marriage. We are not in charge of saving our kids or making them who they need to be.
- When we put purity and virginity on a pedestal, it becomes an idol. We need to have conversations with our kids that steer them away from thinking that their success and good behavior could save them.
- We need a bigger vision of what faithful marriage and good sex look like—that sex is beautifully intertwined with closeness, affection, and love between a husband and wife.

Hint: Screen shot or print this page to refer back to later!



A Parent's Guide to **PURITY**

Discussion Questions

- **What do you notice about what your friends are saying and doing in regards to sex? How does your music talk about it all? What about movies and shows? How is the topic of sex, modesty, and purity treated? Do people appear to be flourishing?**
- **How do you think God responds when we mess up? Why do you think so?** Discuss the idea of grace and mercy, that God's love for us doesn't hinge on our right or wrong behavior, and how we reconcile that with the idea that what we do matters.
- **What's your definition of the Gospel? Does your teen reference Jesus' work on the cross only, or do they see it as the whole of what God has done, is doing, and will do on our behalf?** Discuss how this truth affects and reaches all corners of our lives and our world.
- **What would an intimate relationship look like to you? What is an intimate relationship not? How does sex come into play?** Talk about the safety, emotional connection, trust, and permanency of an intimate relationship.
- **Why do you think that God would ask us to wait until marriage to have sex?**

Hint: Screen shot or print this page to refer back to later!