1+1=1

Moses is careful to clarify that when God created humanity in His image, He made them male and female—a plurality of two sexual beings (Gen. 1:27). When referring to Himself, He uses plural pronouns: “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness” (Gen. 1:26). The mystery of the triune God is signaled: three separate Beings yet one God.

Having created humanity as male and female, God then establishes the normative marriage between one man and one woman. The Septuagint translation of Genesis 2:24 adds a numerical specification to the one flesh declaration not present in the original Hebrew. It reads, “The two shall be one flesh.” This editorial interpretation underscores the fact that the verse is referencing the union of one male and one female to form one flesh: 1+1=1. It is a simple formula with a myriad of implications that will be explored in the next few lessons.

This lesson will explore the significance of the number of components in the first part of the equation. A marriage is not composed of a singularity, nor is it composed of a nondescript plurality, but it is specifically composed of a duality. The previous lesson addressed the second half of the equation, where two individuals come together to form one flesh. The two lessons after this one will turn to the nature of the elements in the first half of the equation and find that the two individuals are both the same and different. The sameness and difference are essential to the proper functioning of the equation. For the current lesson, though, we talk numbers.
Write out Ecclesiastes 2:1–11 from the Bible translation of your choice. You may also rewrite the passage in your own words, or outline or mind-map the chapter.
Abraham was called the friend of God (James 2:23). David was a man after God's own heart (Acts 13:22). Solomon was the wisest man ever to live (outside of Jesus—1 Kings 4:29–34). What do these men have in common other than their apparent favored status with God? They all had multiple wives. So, what happened? Did the Old Testament God acquiesce to the cultural norms of the day and permit what He later disdained? Or is there something else at play here?

Besides the examples of Old Testament men of faith, there are various texts that are assumed to support polygamy in ancient Israel. The levirate, for instance, has been said to indirectly condone polygamy for the sake of preserving a deceased brother's legacy (Deut. 25:5–10). However, this view neglects the fact that the living brother had the option of refusal. And no instance of its application in the Bible led to polygamy (cf. Gen. 38; Ruth 4). Another text used is the law requiring a man who has slept with a virgin not his wife to marry her (Deut. 22:28, 29). If the man is already married, it is suggested, then this would lead to polygamy. However, in Exodus 22:16, 17, where the same law is found, the father may refuse the marriage for whatever reason, so polygamy is not a given.

One text worthy of closer examination is Leviticus 18:18. In the New King James Version it reads, “Nor shall you take a woman as a rival to her sister, to uncover her nakedness while the other is alive.” Some have taken this text to mean that polygamy was actually permitted among the Israelites, just not in the case of two sisters marrying the same man. Moreover, the text is typically viewed as part of the laws concerning incest, as verses 7–17 are. The verses in Leviticus 18:7–17 have a particular formation in the Hebrew, beginning with erwat (“nakedness of”) and ending with lo tgallêh (“you shall not uncover”) forming a textual unit. The next section, Leviticus 18:18–23, has a different formation, each verse beginning with waw (a conjunction) and ending with other prohibitions beginning with lo (a negation). Leviticus 18:18 therefore, is not about incest.

Moreover, the term sister (ahôt) is used in different ways in the Old Testament. Sometimes it refers to a blood sister (Gen. 4:22), sometimes a half sister (Gen. 20:12), other times a kinswoman (Gen. 24:59, 60), or even a female fellow citizen in general (Num. 25:18; Hos. 2:1). Since Leviticus 18:18 is not necessarily about incest, the term sister here does not, of a necessity, need to be translated as referring to a blood relation. In fact, the formation of the phrase ‘ishah ‘el-‘akhotah is used idiomatically in the Old Testament to mean adding one to another of the same kind (cf. Ezek. 1:9, 23; 3:13). Its male equivalent, ‘ish ‘el-‘akiw, is used similarly (cf. Gen. 37:19; Exod. 37:9; Num. 14:4). A clearer translation of Leviticus 18:18 would read, “And you shall not marry a woman in addition to another as a second wife while she is alive, to uncover her nakedness” (Lev. 18:18, NASB1995 alternative).

Contrary to the view that Leviticus 18:18 sanctions polygamy with the exception of incest, this text is actually a prohibition of polygamy. Furthermore, it is a prohibition designated an abomination (Lev. 18:24–29). This means that it is universally applicable, not just restricted to the Israelites. The monogamous marriage is God's ideal for all of humanity as set forth in the creation narrative.

The fact that we find narratives in the Bible that illustrate the lives of those living contrary to God's commands is not an endorsement of their disobedience. In fact, the realization that men who were privileged to commune so closely with God still failed in certain areas of their lives ought to humble our perception of our own ability to live righteously. The Bible has good and bad examples (cf. 1 Cor. 10:1–12). The good examples are for us to follow, and the bad examples are to serve as warnings.
While zero is an integer, it is neutral in that it defines neither a positive nor negative value. Yet, if you remember factorials from algebra class, you’ll remember that the factorial of zero is mathematically defined as one. It has to be, so that all the other factorials work. Today’s equation defines sexuality as experienced by a solitary individual and yet even in the absence of another person, others may be involved. We’re talking, in this section, about the taboo topic of masturbation.

First, let’s face the facts. Masturbation does not meet the divine formula for sexual expression but it is practiced more often than confessed. For some, it is a mechanism to cope with the sexual urges they cannot express. For others it is a form of relaxation and just another part of their day. Yet others are in a struggle to stop masturbating, battling feelings of guilt, shame, and defeat after every indulgence.

Here are four common myths currently in circulation about the practice of masturbation.

Because it’s natural, it’s right. It will be argued that even little children explore their genitalia in a manner akin to masturbation. Were it not for social norms prohibiting such behavior, some would say, then as the body matures, masturbation would be a natural activity to engage in without the encumbrance of guilt and shame. This view does not cohere with the biblical perspective, which does not define morality by what feels natural. Sin has so corrupted our nature that we cannot let it be as our guide (Rom. 8:7). Rather we must yield ourselves to obey God’s definition of what we were created to be and to do.

Pragmatic reasons. There are various benefits touted for masturbation. From lowering stress and soothing you to sleep, it relieves sexual tension, helping you to focus, and for women, can even relieve cramps. But is this the only way to achieve these outcomes? Teleological ethics basically holds that the end justifies the means so that as long as the desired goal is good, it does not matter how you get there. However, Proverbs 14:12 (and 16:25) tells us that “there is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death.” We are, rather, to trust God’s ways (Psalm 37:3–5).

Educational reasons. “You need to masturbate in order to better understand your own wants and needs, and then you can teach your spouse how to please you.” Two false assumptions underlie this claim. The first is that your spouse could replicate what you do to sexually stimulate yourself. From the potential involvement of pornography or sheer fantasy to the mechanics of the method of stimulation whether manual or mechanical, a partner cannot replicate the masturbation experience. This in turn can lead to frustration, and rather than learning to please each other sexually, two individuals may find themselves mutually self-pleasing during the sexual act. The second false assumption is that the sexual act is purely physical and focusing on understanding the physical aspects that lead to sexual climax could instruct an individual on how climax is achieved when engaged in the act with another person. If anything, masturbation is a miseducation on what sexual intimacy between two God-fearing individuals looks like.

You’re not hurting anybody. The pornography industry is fraught with questionable content. Whether it is revenge porn or videos made through the sex trafficking trade, those ingesting this form of media have no assurance that no one was indeed hurt during the making of the material. Pornography aside, to the previous point on the miseducation of masturbation, there will certainly be emotional damage done to the partner who finds that they cannot, for all their best efforts, bring pleasure to their spouse. Moreover, while we may not fully comprehend the ramifications, a deviation from God’s ideal is never without personal harm. And most importantly, the God who gave Himself so that we could experience victorious Christian living is worth our consideration as well.

The practice of masturbation is fueled by three things, which are all objectionable. Pornography, besides the potential harm to others, is certainly objectionable on the grounds of Matthew 5:27, 28. Sexual fantasy cannot stand the Philippians 4:8 test. And last, a purely hedonistic masturbatory experience focused on the physical sensations of sexual stimulation contravenes the oft-repeated counsel to avoid the selfish pursuit of pleasure (cf. Eccl. 2:1–11; 12:8–13).
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What relationship do the following verses have with the primary passage?

Genesis 2:18, 21–24
Matthew 19:4, 5
1 Corinthians 6:16
Deuteronomy 17:16, 17
Romans 13:8–14

What other verses/promises come to mind with twoness?

Review your memorized verse from Ecclesiastes 2:1–11.
When you have an equation with brackets, you must deal with the brackets first, so let us begin our discussion in this section with the inside of the brackets. In the marriage relationship, each individual must have their own personal walk with Jesus. Your spouse’s Christianity cannot substitute yours, nor can the family’s commitment replace a personal devotion to the Lord.

Just as the marriage relationship is exclusive, between only one man and one woman, so Christ calls us to an exclusive relationship with Him. He invites us to a deep, intimate, trusting relationship and guards that trust jealously. Every relationship runs the risk of the trust being broken and the parties to the relationship being hurt. Through creation, God already took the risk of relationship with humanity, and has been hurt by our rejection. Yet He still invites us to restore that relationship. Framed as God’s desire for His relationship with us, the first four of the ten commandments are insightful.

“You shall have no other gods before Me.” No one else is to take the place in our lives reserved for God—it is an exclusive relationship. To remain in this relationship must be of the utmost importance, and anything that might impede that goal must be eliminated.

“You shall not make for yourself a carved image . . . you shall not bow down to them nor serve them.” God wants an authentic relationship with us—not one based on our ideas of who He is but based on who He actually is. Rather than carving out a static symbol of our notion of God and imposing on it whatever attributes we deem fit, God wants us to get to know Him personally, as He reveals Himself to us through His Word.

“You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.” God is calling us to a serious, committed relationship. He is not playing the field, and He is not looking for a casual dating relationship with us. If we say we are His, He wants a deep commitment.

“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.” Once a week God has reserved quality time with us. Spending focused time with your partner is essential to a healthy relationship. Missing date night or showing up distracted by your phone is sure to limit the relationship’s longevity. God has special plans for our time together every week, and He is hoping we won’t stand Him up.

When each partner makes Christ first, last, and best in their lives, it draws them to each other. Their thoughts, affections, priorities, and goals become increasingly similar, even as they retain their individuality. The closer they draw to Christ, the closer they become to each other, thus increasing their unity.

Moreover, orienting your lives around Christ, not just individually but as a couple, ensures the greatest unity possible. When Jesus is at the center of your financial planning, your family planning, and your ministry planning, He brings a unity of purpose that helps to focus your goals. He even directs your planning so that your goals will align with what will be for your highest good.

It is no wonder that Jesus is the key to the best sexuality equation, because He always has been the key. Before sin entered the world, Adam and Eve enjoyed the harmony of perfect unity, but Genesis 3:8–13 testifies of what estrangement from God does to our relationships. Even if you have failed to honor God in your sexual life in the past, Jesus enters the equation of your life and can bring about the healing necessary to experience a fulfilling sexual life in the future. Jesus is the key to the equation working smoothly.
Review the memory verse.
How does it apply to your life this week?

After this week’s study of the text, what personal applications are you convicted of in your life?

What are applications can be made in your social life?

“No More Prepared Than Satan?”

“I have been shown that we live amid the perils of the last days. Because iniquity abounds, the love of many waxes cold. The word ‘many’ refers to the professed followers of Christ. They are affected by the prevailing iniquity and backslide from God, but it is not necessary that they should be thus affected. The cause of this declension is that they do not stand clear from this iniquity. The fact that their love to God is waxing cold because iniquity abounds shows that they are, in some sense, partakers in this iniquity, or it would not affect their love for God and their zeal and fervor in His cause.

“A terrible picture of the condition of the world has been presented before me. Immorality abounds everywhere. Licentiousness is the special sin of this age. Never did vice lift its deformed head with such boldness as now. The people seem to be benumbed, and the lovers of virtue and true goodness are nearly discouraged by its boldness, strength, and prevalence. The iniquity which abounds is not merely confined to the unbeliever and the scoffer. Would that this were the case, but it is not. Many men and women who profess the religion of Christ are guilty. Even some who profess to be looking for His appearing are no more prepared for that event than Satan himself . . .

“Some who make a high profession do not understand the sin of self-abuse [masturbation] and its sure results. Long-established habit has blinded their understanding. They do not realize the exceeding sinfulness of this degrading sin, which is enervating the system and destroying their brain nerve power. Moral principle is exceedingly weak when it conflicts with established habit. Solemn messages from heaven cannot forcibly impress the heart that is not fortified against the indulgence of this degrading vice. The sensitive nerves of the brain have lost their healthy tone by morbid excitation to gratify an unnatural desire for sensual indulgence. The brain nerves which communicate with the entire system are the only medium through which Heaven can communicate to man and affect his inmost life. Whatever disturbs the circulation of the electric currents in the nervous system lessens the strength of the vital powers, and the result is a deadening of the sensibilities of the mind. In consideration of these facts, how important that ministers and people who profess godliness should stand forth clear and uncontaminated from this soul-debasing vice! . . .

“Some will acknowledge the evil of sinful indulgences, yet will excuse themselves by saying that they cannot overcome their passions. This is a terrible admission for any person to make who names Christ. ‘Let everyone that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity.’ Why is this weakness? It is because the animal propensities have been strengthened by exercise until they have gained the ascendancy over the higher powers. Men and women lack principle. They are dying spiritually because they have so long pampered their natural appetites that their power of self-government seems gone. The lower passions of their nature have taken the reins, and that which should be the governing power has become the servant of corrupt passion. The soul is held in lowest bondage. Sensuality has quenched the desire for holiness and withered spiritual prosperity.” (White, Testimonies for the Church, 2:346–349.)
Share insights from this week’s memory verse and Bible study as well as any discoveries, observations, and questions with your Sabbath School class (or Bible study group). Consider these discussion questions with the rest of the group.

What are some good reasons to pursue a monogamous relationship?

What are some bad reasons to pursue a monogamous relationship?

What does God’s ideal for marriage of one male and one female becoming one teach us about the Godhead?

What are practical tools for single people to navigate their sexual desires?

Is masturbation acceptable within the context of marriage? Why or why not?

How do the lives of Abraham, David, and Solomon (as well as other Bible heroes who practiced polygamy) serve as warnings against contravening God’s will with respect to monogamy?

What are some Bible examples of monogamy that you find encouraging?