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Sexual Difficulties in Marriage

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We'll be covering today how to connect the glory of God to even some of the most specific and intimate parts of our lives, like physical intimacy.

We're talking about sexual struggles in marriage. Many couples struggle in their physical relationship and physical intimacy is an important part of the marital relationship. To counsel marriages, we must be prepared to address it. We must be prepared to talk about it, to ask questions, and to engage respectfully, carefully, and with wisdom—but also with boldness knowing that God's Word speaks to every aspect of life.

You may ask, "Is this really a problem?" The reality is this is something we need to be prepared to address, just like every other part of a marriage. To not do so would almost be like trying to do marriage counseling, but not talking about communication. Or trying to do marriage counseling, but never talking about finances. Or trying to do marriage counseling, but never talking about parenting. All of it would leave this gaping hole, and I think the same is true when we try to do marriage counseling, but don't talk about physical intimacy.

Sexual struggles in marriage come from all sorts of different places. It's not all just a specific sexual sin or lust. It comes from past sin, from personal selfishness, from idolatry—maybe it's the idolatry of sexual pleasure, maybe it's some other idolatry that it causes problems like idolatry in power, control, escape, acceptance, or self-worth. Lust causes problems in physical intimacy. Laziness causes problems in physical intimacy. As biblical counselors, I'm actually going to assume that you're equipped through your training for how to address all of those different heart issues, how to wrestle through those and walk people through those things.

In our limited time I'm not going to reiterate that which I am assuming you already know how to do so well. If there's one significant contributor to sexual struggles in marriage that I've found in the lives of counselees—and I actually find that many in the church aren't equipped for—is in one sense so basic that we kind of just hop over it. It's the answer to the simple question: What did God create sex for?

If it counselee ever asked you the question, "What did God create sex for?" Would you know quickly how to answer them?

The church today has spent a significant amount of time and energy—and rightfully so—discussing what God-glorifying sex is not. But I'm afraid we haven't spent near enough time talking about what it is.

Knowing the purpose of sex helps us to identify what's off when our counselees face sexual struggles. Having a firm grasp on what God created sex for will help us identify what's askew in their relationship.

Many of the couples we counsel say, "Okay, sex is not with someone of your same gender: Check. Sex is not with someone who is not your spouse: Check. Sex is not pornography: Check. Okay, I seem to have gotten all this right, so why is this so hard? Why do we continue to struggle? Why does this continue to be a significant place of tension in our relationship?"

Over the years I've found that tons of married couples struggle sexually because they have no idea ultimately what God created sex for. Similarly, I think the struggles of the single people in our churches are made significantly harder by the fact that they don't know what God created sex for. We haven't taken the time to equip them. The church's position toward singles has seemingly been to say, "You're not supposed to do it, so we can't tell you." They need to have a theology of sex that helps to make sense of why it's so beautiful and perfect in the context that God created it for.

We're not going to talk about singles and how God's purpose for sex equips them—and that's a whole different topic (and I think a good one), but we'll talk here about how it affects married couples. Most married couples you counsel will have struggles in their sexual life.

Married couples tend to actually have a lot of questions about what sex is and the place it should hold in their marriage. A lot of married couples really don't know how to think of sex. To treat sex as unimportant seems kind of like a bummer, but because the world talks so highly of it, they think maybe as Christians we shouldn't think it's that important; but to think of sex as ultimately important doesn't seem right either.

Yet, to ask questions about sex is downright embarrassing. That's why so many don't. They live without the Word of God ever penetrating into this significantly powerful aspect of their life and aspect of their relationship.

This is why we as counselors need to be the ones who are able to provide that safe place. If they can't talk to us about this, who in the world can they talk to? If they can't talk to somebody who's offering them biblical counsel, who are they asking to get that information? Who is going to bring the Word of God and the glory of God to bear into this area of their life? If they can't think it up on their own, who else are they going to go to?

We need to know what God says about sex and we need to be comfortable and confident enough to facilitate conversations among couples regarding their sex lives. Do you think I'm comfortable talking to you about this? But I can make it in an infinitely worse by acting awkward—just like you can make it infinitely harder in your counseling relationships.

By talking about it plainly, talking about it confidently and uplifting the Word of God, we can actually do them a great service and show them that marital sex is meant to not have shame—because so many of them carry so much shame with them.

We also need to exercise discretion and wisdom, obviously. Not getting into specifics between the two of them alone, but providing clarity and guidance that can be genuinely helpful. The tendency of most counselees who desire to honor the Lord—and I would say the tendency of most Christians—is to take the Word of God and they want it to transform every area of their life. They want it to transform their home life, their work life, their relationships, their friendships, their family, and everything—except the bedroom. Even the most dedicated Christians oftentimes tend to close the bedroom door and leave God outside. They say, "All my life is for Him, but I don't know what to do with Him in here. I guess this is just for us, because it's I can't imagine Him being a part of this."

Too many Christians do this. If we are not able to discuss these topics with them, then all we do is reinforce that mindset.

What is Sex?

What is sex? What did God create it for? Why did He create it so powerful? Why did He create it so enjoyable? Why did He create it so complex?

In the first chapter of *Sex in the Supremacy of Christ*, John Piper writes: “God created us in his image, male and female, with personhood and sexual passions, so that when he comes to us in this world there would be these powerful words and images to describe the promises and pleasures of our covenant relationship with him through Christ.”

Do you hear what he’s saying here? Piper is saying that God created sex as a means by which He may communicate to us about our relationship with Him. In fact, He created sex as one of the means to provide a vocabulary for us, so that we might have concepts to understand what our relationship with Him is like.

Why shouldn’t it be? Ultimately sex is about God. Sex is not for the glory of people. God created it—like He created everything else in this world—for His glory. Colossians 1:16 tells us, “For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him.”

Practically, sex is about us—it’s about a relationship. But ultimately, it’s meant to teach us about God.

We see in Scripture that God’s glory is demonstrated in sex through four fundamental purposes. The four fundamental purposes of sex:

1. Sex is a means of covenantal union.
2. Sex is a means of mutual pleasure.
3. Sex is an expression of the marital relationship.
4. Sex is an expression of the relationship between Christ and the Church.

The reason I would call these the fundamental purposes of sex is because they lay the foundation for our understanding of God’s design for sex and for a sex life that glorifies God. These are the fundamental purposes, meaning that if any one of them is missing, our engagement in physical intimacy—even in marriage—ceases to glorify God.

This is to be distinguished from secondary purposes. Secondary purposes are things like procreation and protection against sin. Similarly, these are purposes of sex, however sex can still be God-glorifying even when these aren’t present. Otherwise physical intimacy among otherwise infertile couples could not be God-glorifying. We know that’s not true.

I believe God never intended for every sexual encounter in marriage to be procreative. He didn’t create us that way. Even before the fall things weren’t created that way. He didn’t command Adam and Eve once she was pregnant to not come together again until it was possible for her to get pregnant again.

Procreation is a secondary purpose. It is absolutely connected, but it’s not one of the things that without it our physical intimacy in marriage cannot be God-glorifying.

Sex is a Means of Covenantal Union

Genesis 2:24 says, “Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.”

Obviously, while Adam and Eve’s becoming of one flesh certainly entails more than just their sexuality, it doesn’t entail less. Through the physical act of becoming one flesh, the husband and the wife are brought together in a union that includes and affects their whole person. This is a physical engagement that unifies them—body and soul.

This is the basis for Paul’s warning in 1 Corinthians 6 about sexual activity outside of marriage. In 1 Corinthians 6:14-16, he says, “The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. And God raised the Lord and will also raise us up by his power. Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! Or do you not know that he who is joined to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For, as it is written, “The two will become one flesh.”

Paul is saying that even in sexual intimacy as casual as sex with a prostitute—something happens. That’s not just a physical act, you’re becoming one flesh with her. That physical act is a means of union.

This union, this bonding, is written on the makeup of our bodies. It’s written on us hormonally in how we were created. In sexual intimacy, this bonding is represented hormonally by the release of oxytocin in women and vasopressin in men. Really briefly, for an example, oxytocin causes the sensation in a woman of relational bonding. It’s an emotional experience of relational bonding, and it’s released in women in four different ways—during labor, during breastfeeding, during intimate touch, and during sexual intercourse.

This is the fingerprints of God’s creation. He tells us in His Word that physical intimacy in marriage is a means union, which is why it belongs in a covenantal structure.

Sex is a Means of Mutual Pleasure

It doesn’t help us to pretend in the church that sex is not pleasurable. That doesn’t help you in counseling, because God created it to be pleasurable. He created pleasure to bless and glorify Himself.

He created all sorts of pleasure to draw our minds to Him—to the goodness and greatness and glory of Him as the creator. Pleasure serves as a powerful communicator of many of the other purposes of sex. Proverbs 5:18-19 says, “Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in the wife of your youth, a lovely deer, a graceful doe. Let her breasts fill you at all times with delight; be intoxicated always in her love.”

He’s talking about being intoxicated with sexual pleasure. Our Christian priorities and our Christian worldview do not hold us back from sexual pleasures. In fact, they heighten sexual pleasure because that pleasure was meant to take place in a covenantal context. When it is experienced in a covenantal context it is unlike casual sex that’s so common, and so tempting for so many.

Studies have shown repeatedly that Bible-believing Christian married couples have more sex and enjoy sex more than their non-Christian counterparts. But most of our counselees don’t believe that because they’ve seen the commercials. They’ve watched the shows, they watch Netflix and they come away with the idea that married sex is boring.

Sex is an Expression of the Marital Relationship

The definition of an expression is a lively or vivid representation of meaning, sentiment, or feeling. Our sexuality gives voice to many different aspects of our marital relationships. In a similar way, music provides an expression for emotions. You can tell somebody, "I love you. You're very important to me. I value you more than any other person." That's a beautiful thing, but it communicates differently when you say that same sentiment poetically, and it communicates something different when you put that poetry to verse. You put that poetry to verse, and you sing a romantic song, it expresses that same truth in a uniquely powerful way.

God created us as beautifully creative beings. All different art forms express meaning in uniquely powerful ways. Physical intimacy in marriage expresses so many of the dynamics of marriage in uniquely powerful ways. Not in the ultimate way—it's not the greatest way, but in uniquely powerful ways.

We read in Genesis 2:25 that, "And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed." We can read that and think, "Whoa." When you read that they were naked and not ashamed, why does that feel weird? It's because of your sexuality. Sexuality has this powerfully expressive aspect to it.

Song of Songs paint such an incredible picture of mutuality, intimacy, passion, and ecstasy in the marital relationship. Have you ever you wondered why God created physical intimacy to produce such an immediate and momentarily ecstatic feeling? Is it just because He wanted to give you a good wedding present?

I think most Christians get married and believe and are taught that sex is God's wedding present to them. That's about all the theology they get about it. It's like the perk. Similar to presents on Christmas—it's been wrapped up, it's been sitting under the tree for years, and now you can open it. So often that's all they know.

That kind of euphoria isn't created because of a perk, it's not created because God had to have it to make people reproduce and otherwise, they wouldn't do it. It's because He wanted to express the joy and ecstasy of what He intended through marriage in a powerful and tangible way. This is a uniquely powerful relationship and it gets expressed in uniquely powerful ways.

Sex is an expression of the marital relationship. This is where every counselee all of a sudden gets awkward, because sex is an expression of the marital relationship, and the marital relationship in expression of the relationship between Christ and His church.

God created marriage to teach us about the relationship between Christ and His church.

Sex is an Expression of the Relationship Between Christ and the Church

Ephesians 5:31 says, "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church."

The marital relationship, and sexuality specifically, was designed by God as a way to communicate His love, passion, intimacy, and joy with a human race that was created in His image.

The vulnerability of shameless nudity is the way God communicates to us what safety and vulnerability we can have with Him. The intimacy experienced in our sexual relationships communicate in a powerful

way what it's meant to be united with Christ. The ecstasy experienced communicates a glimpse of what it will be like to be His church and spend eternity in the presence of our Savior.

Sex is not about Christ and His church in its actions, that's heresy. That's where we need to be careful. Sex is about Christ and His church in its expressions and its effects. As married couples reflect on that aspect of our relationship, God designed it to point us to Him, remind us of His glory, teach us about just what He's capable of, give us a taste so that we might just glory in what perfect intimacy will be like, what perfect vulnerability will be like, what perfect joy will be like.

This is an expression of Christ and the church, that's why couples need to be so careful because in the context of sexuality you are always vividly expressing something.

Sex is always vividly expressing. It's either vividly expressing your selfishness, your self-centeredness, and your idolatry—it's putting it on in bold display—or it's putting God-centeredness and the glory of God on bold display. You don't get the option of sex not putting anything on display. Just like every area in your life, and in a uniquely powerful way, sexuality is always boldly displaying, vividly representing, and expressing something.

If the Word of God is truly sufficient, it's sufficient for all of marriage, and it's sufficient for every part of marriage. Everything must flow from an accurate understanding of what God created physical intimacy for.

Sex is a means of union: Does it unite us?

Sex is a means of pleasure: Is it pleasurable?

Sex is an expression of the marital relationship: Does it express mutual love between us?

That's our biblical foundation, and now I want to spend time thinking through how that looks put into practice. What does it look like to talk with couples about how to grow in these areas?

How do we help couples to practically pursue physical intimacy that unites, is pleasurable, and expresses mutual love?

10 Steps to a Beautiful, God-Glorifying Sex Life

These aren't meant to be taken in order. The goal here isn't to have your counselees complete number one, then move onto number two, etc. They're meant to be practical applications of the principles we've discussed. If these four fundamental purposes are what God created physical intimacy for in marriage, then what are the areas that we can apply? What are ways that we can do that?

I intended each one of these to be an area for you to develop homework in. This is kind of a push start on homework assignments, to give you ideas for how you can develop projects for growth to assign to the people you're counseling to help them strengthen, grow, think through, and wrestle through how they are pleasing God in this area of life.

1. Apply the Gospel to Your Sexual Past, Present, and Future

When we see what God created sex for, your counselees are going to be reminded of the ways that they fall short.

They will see the ways that God's design for sex hasn't been their experience of physical intimacy—maybe that's not even presently their experience of physical intimacy. They will be reminded of all the ways we're not back in Eden yet. We need to remind people of what God created sex for, but also regularly and constantly apply the gospel to the ways that they've suffered the sexually in their past, their present, or may even in their future, and the ways that they have sinned.

We need to be reminding them basic truths like Romans 8:28. There's no way they have suffered that is beyond God's redemption.

There's no abuse they've experienced, no coercion they've experienced, no ways that they've suffered sexually that are beyond God's beautiful and glorious redemption, or that disqualify them in any way from pursuing what God created covenantal physical intimacy to be.

Romans 8:28-29 says, "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers."

God wants to take every area in our life, and redeem our suffering by making us more and more into the image of His Son—including this area.

For those counselees who have sinned sexually—which means all of them—who have pursued self-pleasure and idolatry over the glory of God in their sex lives, there is a hope as well. God is redeeming, He is sanctifying, He's making them more and more into the image of His Son.

No matter what they have done, no matter what idolatry exists in their past, there may be consequences, but there is no condemnation. As Romans 8:1-2 says, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death."

To grow in this area of their life (as in any area of their life) they need to be saturating themselves in the gospel, applying the truth of the gospel to every aspect of their past, present, and future. Again, who else are they going to talk to about this? And who else if they talk about how they're struggling in their marriage in this area is going to bring the freedom of the gospel to bear?

We need to help them resist the lies and the claim that the gospel is not powerful enough for what they've been through, who they are, or what they've done. The gospel and God's grace is always bigger.

2. Set your affection on your spouse

If this is what God created physical intimacy to be, we need to encourage and call them to set their affections on their spouse. This is modeled in Song of Songs.

I don't think this was written by Solomon, it was honored and given to Solomon. But when we look at the rest of Solomon's life, there's a bit of a discontinuity there. Regardless, the shepherd in Song of Songs and his wife model for us how to set your affection on your spouse.

The shepherd and his wife in Song of Songs were not objectively the most beautiful people in the world. The intent of that book is not for us to say, "Wow, he got the most glorious woman. She's to be praised among 10,000. I guess he's got number one. But who am I gonna end up with?"

That's not what he's communicating. Song of Songs is not the story of the two most attractive people, where the reason they speak about each other—and even speak about each other physically—is because of some objective, literal observation. Rather, in their love, they have set their affection on their spouse. Their spouse has become to them the very definition of beauty.

God's created this person for them, and so instead of looking elsewhere and thinking, "Well that part of that woman, or that part of that man, is better," instead they recognize that this person—this embodied soul—that they're covenanting to is now the place of their affection.

That's why in Song of Solomon 4, he can say, "Behold, you are beautiful, my love, behold, you are beautiful! Your eyes are doves behind your veil. Your hair is like a flock of goats leaping down the slopes of Gilead. You are altogether beautiful, my love; there is no flaw in you."

Is that a literal statement? When he's saying, "Amazing. I got the one flawless woman!" No, he says that because if it was in her—if it was a part of her, the embodied soul, whom he loved—it wasn't a flaw. It was beautiful because he had set his affection on her.

She says of him, "My beloved is radiant and ruddy, distinguished among ten thousand." The same principle is true, she had set her affection on him.

Similarly, Solomon later did not write that he wished everyone could have a wife like his, because she was so objectively superior. No, he said, "Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in the wife of *your* youth, a lovely deer, a graceful doe. Let *her* breasts fill you at all times with delight; be intoxicated always in *her* love." (Emphases added).

Beauty is literally in the eye of the beholder.

Beauty is absolutely culturally defined—different cultures define all sorts of different things as beautiful because beauty is subjective in that way. It's malleable and it's malleable in our own hearts and minds. If sex is a means of union, if it's meant to express the fullness of your love for another person, then it starts with internally setting your affection on that person. Not on all those things out here, but setting your affection on that person.

This is so incredibly difficult in our pornographic world. Porn is everywhere. The guy you're meeting with next week is probably looking at porn, and that undercuts everything that God is doing. There's grace for that, God can redeem from it—He absolutely can and He does bring freedom.

If your counselees are going to pursue God's design for physical intimacy, we have to call them not just to look away from pornography, but look to their spouse and set their affection on their spouse.

3. Learn your spouse's desires

Every married person has different desires and a different amount of desire than their spouse. I have counseled couples where the husband desires sex more than his wife. I've counseled couples where the wife desires sex more than her husband. The only couple I have never counseled is the couple that wants it the same.

That's not a flaw. That's not incompatibility. God created it this way. If your desires in marriage were the same, you would have no opportunity to express love. The expression of selfishness, would be the exact same thing as the expression of love.

“Why are we together? Because I want it—and whenever I want it you want it, it’s magic.” There’s no sacrifice there. There’s no others-centeredness. I could be completely selfish and it wouldn’t matter. That’s not how it is. That’s not how it’s meant to be.

We need to encourage couples to be students of each other, to learn. This is similar to counseling. In counseling you have to study the Word of God and you have to study the person, so that you might apply the Word of God accurately and in wisdom to the person. Similarly if your counselees are to grow together in their relationship, they need to both study the Word of God and His truth and they need to be students of each other. Learn each other, learn their physical desires, learn their timing desires, learn their personality desires.

Ed Wheat puts it this way, “If you do what comes naturally in lovemaking, almost every time you will be wrong.”

Philippians 2 tells us, “Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.” This starts with learning the desires of others.

4. Consider your spouse’s desires

Learn your spouse’s desires, then the next step is to consider your spouse’s desires.

First learn what they are, and then next actually take them into consideration. The book knowledge isn’t enough, we must actually take them into consideration. 1 Corinthians 7:4 tells us, “For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does.”

We’re meant to take one another’s desires into consideration and to put others before ourselves.

That’s not domineering either way. It’s not forcible either way. But it is meant for you to learn one another’s desires, to be students of one another’s desires, and then to consider one another’s desires and to put those into practice.

Every couple always asks, “Okay, but what do we do when we have different desires?” That’s the big question.

What do you do when you have different desires about what restaurant you’re going to go to? I mean, I’m assuming you have different desires constantly in all sorts of areas in life. What do you do when you have different desires? You talk openly, you talk honestly, and you seek to serve and sacrifice for one another as you grow in Christlikeness.

Maybe the words of 1 Corinthians 13 applied specifically to physical intimacy can help. Help the counselee apply in lovemaking that, “Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”

For homework, simply have them seek to apply love in their lovemaking. What does it look like to consider one another’s desires and to be students one another, and then to manifest Christlikeness in physical intimacy?

5. Learn your spouse's anatomy

This is potentially the most awkward, but I think it's really important. You need to encourage your counselees to learn their spouse's anatomy.

Some of you are thinking, "Why are we talking about this?" We're talking about this because they don't know.

Men and women were created to enjoy physical intimacy differently. Yet, 90 percent of couples that get married—even Christian couples—seem to not know that simple fact.

Do they know what the typical differences are? If they don't, who do they get their information from? Help identify where a couple got their education in this area. Most of them are probably going to be from false pornographic or pseudo-pornographic sources. Who are we banking on talking to them—their parents?

Are we banking on their pastor making sure that before they say "I do," they're talking about this?

In some ways I hope so, but most of the time they're getting their information from media or movies. Almost always in that setting what is depicted is male-centric sex, depictions about what men generally enjoy. This creates a huge gap in their information. You need to help them provide them with some resources and know where you can point them.

There's a few books that I think can be helpful resources. I wouldn't fully affirm everything in these books, but they can be really helpful resources. One is *Intended for Pleasure* by Ed Wheat. Another is *Sheet Music* by Kevin Leman. Another is *The Act of Marriage* by Tim LaHaye.

Have you read resources that you can point them to? You need to give them guidance, because they need it. If they're not going to get this from us, what are they going to do? They're going to Google it. Don't let them Google it!

6. Learn the (true) biblical guidelines of sex

God has put a fence around our sexuality, but that fence doesn't exist to limit our enjoyment. It's meant to keep us safe from harm and free us to true enjoyment within the fence. It's like a fence that parents put around their front yard so kids don't go running out into the street, but can be free to enjoy the yard within the fence.

There are things that Scripture and its principles explicitly forbids and they need to know that. Sex is a means of union and expression of the marital union between two people, so it's forbidden to engage in any sexual acts with any more or any less than those two people.

Sexual immorality equals sexual activity outside of God's expressed design for one man and one woman in the context of a covenantal marriage. There are also all sorts of sexual activities that while not explicitly forbidden in Scripture, people have to very careful and probably should wisely avoid.

I think of an example like role playing. People may say, "Well, I looked at my Scripture. God never said don't role play." Yet, I have a hard time imagining how pretending to be someone else is unifying and is a way that you can express your love for one another.

But there's also some couples, and probably many couples in our churches, that have taken the fence God made and then have built fence upon fence and now they're trying to operate in this 3-by-3 yard.

We have to consider that there are some sexual activities that are biblically permissible, maybe even advisable, that people incorrectly view as wrong, vulgar, or dirty. We should never encourage someone to act against their conscience. We start there, we would never encourage anybody to act against their conscience. But like we do in all areas of life, we should also be sources that help to inform their conscience, and bring their conscience in increasing ways in line with Scripture.

As counselors, we need to be biblically informed, studying, considering, "What does the Word of God say?" so that we're not simply placing our preferences on those we counsel.

Use the purposes we've discussed before: Does this unify? Is it mutually pleasurable for both of us? Does it express the nature of marriage? Those would be really helpful questions to start with.

7. Recognize the importance of frequency

Recognize the importance of frequency—that is exactly how I word it with my counselees. I don't have any specific frequency in mind. I'm not encouraging a certain type of frequency, but if God created physical intimacy to be a means of union, created it to be a way to express in uniquely powerful ways our marital relationship, then unless there are extenuating circumstances it should be a regular part of your marital relationship.

The ESV translates 1 Corinthians 7:3 this way, "The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband." Now, I love the ESV. I preach from the ESV. I meditate on the ESV. I memorize the ESV. But I'm not sure "conjugal rights" is the best translation there.

The NASB says, "The husband must fulfill his duty to his wife, and likewise also the wife to her husband."

The NTL says, "The husband should fulfill his wife's sexual needs, and the wife should fulfill her husband's needs." That's a little closer, but thinking of sex as in need is also very problematic.

The gist of what this passage is communicating, I think is actually helpfully expressed in The Message. I think it actually catches the heart of what God's after. It says, "The marriage bed must be a place of mutuality—the husband seeking to satisfy his wife, the wife seeking to satisfy her husband. Marriage is not a place to 'stand up for your rights.' Marriage is a decision to serve the other, whether in bed or out."

That's a paraphrase, it's not a translation. But I think it's a beautiful depiction of what I believe Paul intended here and what God is calling us to. The importance of frequency simply means that the marriage bed should be a place of mutuality—looking for ways to satisfy and to bless one another.

8. Appreciate the importance of foreplay

I tell couples that if sex is about union, then it's not just about a physical act. It's about the whole person, so exploration, flirting, suggesting, cuddling, and teasing are all activities that enhance the sexual experience and unite us, pleasure us, and express our love. Foreplay can be doing dishes, or putting the kids to bed, or coming home early, or just thinking about each other.

Encourage them to get away from the idea that sex is just a physical act. It's a whole person expression of love. C.J. Mahaney, speaking specifically to husbands, in his great book *Sex, Romance, and the Glory of God*, writes "You have to touch your wife's heart before you can touch her body."

9. Identify sex's greatest enemies...and address them

For homework, have your counselees identify, what are the hurdles for them? If you're too busy to have sex, you're too busy. Is it tiredness? If you're too tired to have sex, you're too tired. Is it individualized entertainment? Put down the individual screens. You know what can help bring people together? Just tell them to share a screen—you don't even have to turn the screen off, just share one.

What else gets in the way? Bad hygiene. That may seem obvious, but sometimes counselees need to be told. Hopelessness so often gets in the way. This is why you need to be engaged as a biblical counselor to give hope.

10. Pray

John 15—what an incredible promise—says, "If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love."

If God's purpose for this area in our life abides in us, and we abide in Him, then we can ask Him to bring about His design for this area in our lives and we can trust that He wants to bring about the Christlikeness that we're pursuing. God is not after selfish sexual pleasure, He is after Christlike service and love. He will create that—so pray.

It is God's specific desire in physical intimacy that it would be a means of union, that it would be a means of pleasure, that it would be an expression of covenantal love, and it would be an expression of the love between Christ and the church. Pray for that as a counselor and tell them to pray for that. I ask them to make prayer a part of their preparation for sex. Stop leaving God outside the door. Come in with Him and say, "God, you're in here with us. There's nothing to be ashamed of here. Help us. Help me in this space, where you're not outside and this is just us, but you're in here with us."

I ask them to pray for unity as they engage together. Pray that they would be for one another's pleasure. Pray for the powerful expression of their love. And ultimately pray for not their selfish desires, but pray for God's glory—because everything in life is about God and His glory, even sex.