

Chastity as a Virtue

BY MATT FRADD

Chastity is not a teeth-gritting ability to avoid violating the sexual rules but a habit of reverence for oneself and others that enables us to use our sexual powers intelligently in the pursuit of human flourishing and happiness.

It comes as a surprise that people can come to despise the very things they deeply desire, but it happens. In fact, I think for many us it is happening today with regard to morality generally and with the ideal of chastity specifically.

Through a simple example, let's examine how such a dramatic reversal of attitudes can occur. Perhaps when we were children our parents said things like "Do not drink Coca-Cola all the time," which we translated into "Thou shalt not drink Coca-Cola *just because we say so.*" Being children, we jumped to the conclusion that our parents were arbitrarily restraining us, were capriciously restricting what we could do at the moment. And if we disobeyed the "thou shalt not" and drank the Coca-Cola anyway, then when our parents found out, we reacted poorly: "But I *really wanted* it now, Mum!" Maybe our parents tried to explain that drinking soda all the time was unhealthy, but the immature versions of ourselves were not listening to them and sometimes threw a fit that involved knocking things over. At least, that was my experience. And it was probably induced by my insane sugar high!

Of course, the very idea of delaying gratification makes little sense to us when we are children. And what ten-year-old child really understands and cares about long-term health? Instead, we wonder why we should delay doing what our desires and feelings are telling us to do — namely, quenching a deep thirst for that delicious, child-obesity-inducing, fizzy liquid. As a kid hooked on sugary drinks, when my options were drinking water (rather than soda) or becoming dehydrated, I was tempted to choose the latter.

Now avid Coca-Cola fanatics — and here I speak from experience because I used to be one — have several options when people offer us water and

remind us that drinking it, rather than the soda we crave, is better for our bodies. We might assume these folks care for us, accept what they say to be wisdom, and thank them for sharing their water (and their insight) with us. But at the other extreme (and I admit there are other responses on the spectrum between these two), we might assume these folks are trying to manage us, reject their advice, and despise their water (and maybe even the water drinkers, for that matter) because we feel we do not have what it takes to drink water like we should. After all, we love Coca-Cola! We might even gulp down some soda as a protest against their advice.¹

The first response is gratitude. But the second is an emotion-stance that social psychologists, following the nineteenth-century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, call *ressentiment*.² *Ressentiment* involves disparaging and rejecting what is good and strong because we feel unable to attain it. At some deep level we still know the thing is good and desire it; but feeling we cannot attain it, we self-deceptively tell ourselves it is bad and reject it.

When we develop *ressentiment*, the old ordering of life toward the good must come down. To continue with our example, after people tell us that drinking as much Coca-Cola as we want is unhealthy, but we have ignored their warnings and drunk it until our health wastes away, it is quite possible that we will not go back and thank them for trying to warn us, but will turn against the ideas they stood for. In a fit of *ressentiment*, we might reject their whole approach to denying strong soda-desires and subjugating them to reason. We might judge those advisors to be weaker people who were trying to impose their view of happiness on us. And here is the final twist: we might think we need some precepts in order to free ourselves from their constant attack. So, we replace “Thou shalt not drink Coca-Cola all the time” and its implied rationale “because Coca-Cola sets you on the path to Type II diabetes” with a new rule: “Thou shalt drink Coca-Cola whenever you feel like it.” Feels good, right?

But, of course, we still experience the negative physical consequences of indulging our desires for Coca-Cola and overthrowing the old order that managed our soda intake: disharmony starts in our bodies and our health suffers. Drinking wholesome amounts of water is the perfection of the human body, and when we abandon that regimen, we suffer the consequences. Our very thirstiness, because it is no longer oriented towards what is really good, slowly begins to consume us like a poison. Our soda-distorted instinct to drink slowly destroys us.

There is evidence that something like this process is causing many people today, even Christians, to experience *ressentiment* toward morality generally and toward specific moral ideals like chastity.

Consider that all of us value truly loving relationships that we can give ourselves to completely, body and soul. We want these relationships to accord with our human dignity and, if we are Christians, we want them to weave into the happiness that God intends for us in this life. “Chastity” is

the traditional name for this ideal that we so deeply value. Chastity is “the successful integration of sexuality within the person and thus the inner unity of man in his bodily and spiritual being.”³ Within the context of marriage, the ideal of chastity is that the love between a man and a woman—body and soul, sexual and spiritual—will be permanent, exclusive, and faithful. In the context of singleness, it is that we, in our loving one another, will not misuse our sexuality, but will be celibate.

It is a common mistake to think that the ideal of chastity applies only within marriage, or that it especially esteems marriage. All persons will be single for at least part of their lives, and some people will be single throughout their lives—because they are called to the single life by God, or because they never find a partner amidst the sexual chaos and confusion of our culture. Yet all of us are called to chastity. Furthermore, we yearn for chastity, for “the integration of sexuality within [our] person.”

However, we live in a culture that makes it very difficult for us to live into the ideal of chastity. All around us we see marriages that are impermanent, personal loyalties that are problematically divided, and spouses and friends who are unfaithful. Sexuality is misused, within marriages and in singleness, in ways that are selfish, in ways that are abusive, and in ways that do not honor God. We do not see very many good examples of people living chastely and, so, we end up despising the ideal. We call chastity “oppressive”; we call it “naïve.” Lacking the strength in ourselves and having little community support to obtain the ideal we desire, we end up resenting it. Many aspects of popular culture—songs, television shows and movies, celebrities—reflect back to us and encourage our collective *ressentiment* of chastity.

Undoubtedly, some of the contemporary scorning of chastity is based on misconceptions people have about the ideal. But, I suspect those distorted ideas about chastity are motivated, in part, by *ressentiment*. (Recall that *ressentiment* is self-deceptive about the good, because it is easier to reject and despise something that appears foolish.)

One common misconception is that chastity is purely negative, that it revolves around not having sex. Admittedly, during singleness and at times in marriage it is appropriate to abstain from sex. But abstinence is not the heart of chastity. It couldn't be, because abstinence by itself does not express any virtue. Abstaining from sex might simply result from two people delaying the fulfillment of their desires to have sex until the opportunity arises. Furthermore, sexual abstinence only identifies what the people are not doing. What should they be doing?

People require positive actions to convey their love for one another. Chaste persons are in control of their sexual desires rather than those desires being in control of them. Chastity enables them to love one another in accord with their common dignity. Simply put, chastity is a sort of reverence: a chaste person reveres and respects the other person by making sure that before they have sex, both are united in a common aim—namely, a marriage

commitment whose mutual goal is the gift of self to the other. When people will the good for one another in this way, they do not act solely on passing desires and feelings, but rather on their commitment to help the other person attain the good and honor God.

Let me illustrate these points with an example from my own marriage. I remember a date with my wife in San Diego's Little Italy. On my iPhone I decided to play Dean Martin's "Sway," and we began dancing in the street as though no one was watching. We ignored the weird looks from passers-by, which I deserved due to my lack of dancing talent. (People who see me dance often ask, "Dude, are you okay?") It was silly and inelegant, but we made each other sway as our friend Dean crooned through the cell phone speakers. And we came home from the date ready to make love.

Now, my wife and I use natural family planning, a method to help couples either achieve or postpone pregnancy by monitoring naturally occurring signs of fertility during the woman's menstrual cycle. There we were ready to make love, and my wife said, "Honey, I'm fertile." We had a decision to make—together. So, we discussed our situation, saying things like, "Are we ready for another child?" "I know we are hard on money right now. Is this the right decision?" "The kids right now are a handful. I'm worried I can't handle more at this moment." Our common bond of married love guided the discussion of the action we should take together.

That particular night we decided not to have sex. We watched our favorite show *The Office* instead. Not as much fun, but still fun. Was our sexual abstinence a purely negative action? No. Our decision to abstain was a positive choice of love. We chose a goal together as one, united by our marriage. This positive action which expressed and enriched our love was a fruit of chastity.

Now I do not want to be misunderstood. The decision to not have sex was not the essential feature of chastity that evening. Chastity does not say just "Do not have sex" or "Have sex." My wife and I could have said, "OK, let's go ahead with our sexual desires and be open to another child," and that equally would have been an expression of chastity. Chastity came to the fore in our reverence for one another, in our stopping to acknowledge and examine our sexual desires, and in orienting our lives toward the good, as we saw it together.

We see few examples of people living chastely and, so, we end up despising the ideal. We call chastity "oppressive" and "naïve." Lacking the strength in ourselves and having little community support to obtain the ideal we desire, we end up resenting it.

Chastity is not a momentary feeling, but a habit of the will that gives us the power to say “no” – to sex outside of the relationship of marriage, and to sex inside the relationship of marriage when it does not further the unity of the spouses. It also encourages us to say “yes” to sex that expresses and nurtures the unifying married love. In each context – single life and married life – chastity goes out to the other in a desire to love the person as the other.

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It does not prevent every disagreement or fill our lives with bunnies, sunshine, and rainbows like a Walt Disney movie. But it integrates our sexual longings with our commitment to love the other person through good and bad times, sick and healthy times, poor and rich times, and ultimately the goodbye of the loved one through

death. Chastity allows us to hold others up for the sake of their personal dignity, not abstaining from inappropriate sexual acts in a negative way, but channeling our desire through positive actions appropriate to our shared life.

Here’s another common misconception about chastity – that it revolves around repressing sexual desire and not thinking about sex. This, I suspect, has it almost exactly backwards. To see why, let’s be clear on the difference between sexual desire and lust. These terms are not synonymous; lust does not mean “strong sexual desire.” Sexual desire is a gift from God that must live up to the high demands of love, expressed in practical wisdom and chastity. Lust, on the other hand, does not propel us to love. Lust does not say, “This is my body given for you”; it says, “This is your body taken for me.” Since this is so, chastity has no interest in repressing sexual desire, but it would really like to eliminate lust.

We live in a sexualized culture. But that fact is increasingly difficult for us to recognize. We are becoming like the baby fish who said to its mother, “Where’s all this water everyone’s talking about?” A distorted sexuality is the water we swim in. I can remember when the word “sexy” was an adjective that meant “alluring,” but now people use it for donuts and ideas and plants, you name it. One day I pulled into work in my new car and a colleague said admiringly, “Man, that’s a sexy car.” I replied, “It’s a minivan!”

When I say our culture is “sexualized,” I mean we *talk* a lot about sex. We joke about it and write in bathroom stalls about it, but we rarely stop to *think* about sex. Frank Sheed (1897-1981), the Australian apologist, explains:

The typical modern man practically never thinks about sex. He dreams of it, of course, by day and by night; he craves for it; he

pictures it, is stimulated or depressed by it, slavers over it. But this frothing, steaming activity is not thinking. Slavering is not thinking, picturing is not thinking, craving is not thinking, dreaming is not thinking. Thinking means bringing the power of the mind to bear: thinking about sex means striving to see sex in its innermost reality and in the function it is meant to serve.⁴

Since this is our situation, chastity has no interest in our not thinking about sex; it would really like for us to think well about sex. The place to start is with the *telos* for which God created us, and why God made the other creatures and us sexual beings: “Be fruitful and multiply” (Genesis 1:22, 28). This tells us that sex, sexual desire, and orgasms are good. Chastity wants us to think about what good it is that they were created for. How do they fit within God’s plan for us to love one another and honor God?

The virtue of chastity calls us, as sexual beings, to revere ourselves as creatures made in the image of God and made to honor God through our actions – through how we do have sex and do not have sex. And it calls us to revere other persons for the sake of the other person’s good and ultimate happiness. When we think about it, this loving reverence for ourselves and others is what we deeply desire. It would be a shame to become confused about chastity and despise it.

NOTES

1 Many Coca-Cola drinkers are not fanatical in this way. They are fine people, as far as I know, and I apologize in advance for besmirching them with a playfully extended analogy.

2 In *On the Genealogy of Morality* I.10-12 (1887), Nietzsche famously deploys the concept of *ressentiment* in his account of how traditional morality arises: he says that because weaker people felt *ressentiment* toward the better and stronger people who dominated them, the weak ones self-deceptively denied the goodness of the strong people and gravitated to moral rules in order to control them. While some societal rules and structures may arise this way, I strongly deny that all morality has this ‘genealogy.’ Indeed, in this article I am flipping the tables on Nietzsche by suggesting that some opposition to divinely-given morality is an expression of *ressentiment*.

3 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1992), §2337. The catechism is available online at www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM (accessed September 24, 2016).

4 Frank Sheed, “The Nature of Sex and Marriage,” in *Society and Sanity: Understanding How to Live Well Together* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2013 [1953]), 99-109, here citing 99.



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