



## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

### Focus Article:

📖 Chastity as a Virtue  
(*Chastity*, pp. 32-37)

### Suggested Article:

📖 Love in Control  
(*Chastity*, pp. 68-69)

### What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to [Christian\\_Reflection@baylor.edu](mailto:Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu).

### Christian Reflection

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# Chastity as a Virtue

Chastity is not a teeth-gritting ability to avoid violating the sexual rules. Rather, chastity is 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.

## Prayer

Scripture Reading: Genesis 2:18-25

## Meditation†

Those who are chaste are fully at peace with their bodies and their sexuality. Chastity is not best seen as the ability to keep oneself from violating the sexual “rules”; rather, it is “a dynamic principle enabling one to use one’s sexual powers intelligently in the pursuit of human flourishing and happiness.”

If chastity is a virtue, it is an aspect of character that a person can aspire to, achieve, stray from, regain. Notice that when the virtue at the top of this spectrum is chastity, there are three different ways of being unchaste – continence, incontinence and the vice of lustfulness.

*Caroline J. Simon*

## Reflection

“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,” Matt Fradd writes. “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.”

However, these truths about the virtue of chastity are easily forgotten today. There are some reasons for our amnesia.

- ▶ *We are unfamiliar with the language of “virtue.”* Caroline Simon notes above that chastity (like other virtues that temper human desire for pleasure) is actually an ideal trait, a settled and comfortable “peace” with our well-ordered desires and pleasures – in this case, our desires for and pleasures regarding sex. Chastity is neither mere continence (a difficult, but successful struggle against disordered desires) nor incontinence (a losing struggle); chastity is not a struggle at all. Of course, many of us continue to struggle with wayward sexual desires. But this suggests that we are not yet chaste and not yet at peace with proper sexual desire, as we want to be.
- ▶ *We experience some resentment toward morality generally and toward specific ideals like chastity.* The emotion-stance of *resentment* “involves disparaging and rejecting what is good and strong because we feel unable to attain it,” Fradd explains.

We long to be at peace with sexual desire in relationships that “accord with our human dignity and...weave into the happiness that God intends for us in this life.” But this ideal seems unattainable. “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,” he notes. “So, we end up despising the ideal. We call chastity ‘oppressive’; we call it ‘naïve.’”



## Christian Reflection

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Lacking the strength in ourselves and having little community support to obtain the ideal we desire, we end up resenting it.”

▶ *We mistakenly think chastity revolves around not having sex.* Yes, during singleness and at times in marriage it is appropriate to not have sex. But abstinence is not the heart of this virtue. “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,” Fradd writes. “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.”

▶ *We mistakenly think chastity revolves around repressing sexual desire and not thinking about sex.* This is “almost exactly backwards,” Fradd notes. Chastity has no interest in eliminating true sexual desire, which says, “This is my body given for you,” but it would like to rid our lives of the lust that says, “This is your body taken for me.”

Furthermore, chastity has no interest in stopping our thinking about sex, but it would like for us to think carefully and well about sex. Fradd says, “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?”

### Study Questions

1. What is the virtue of chastity? Discuss how we aspire to, achieve, stray from, and regain it.
2. By what process, according to Matt Fradd, do people come to feel *ressentiment* against morality in general and the ideals of chastity in particular? Consider how this might be averted.
3. What are the common misconceptions about chastity today?
4. Given the differences among chastity, continence, and incontinence regarding sexual desire and pleasure, how do you interpret the meaning of Botticelli’s *Pallas and the Centaur*?

### Departing Hymn: “Teach Us to Love the True”

Teach us to love the true,  
the beautiful and pure,  
and let us not for one short hour  
an evil thought endure.  
And give us grace to stand  
decided, brave, and strong,  
the lovers of all holy things,  
the foes of all things wrong.

Walter J. Mathams (1913)  
Suggested tune: DIADEMATA

† Caroline J. Simon, *Bringing Sex into Focus: The Quest for Sexual Integrity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 75-76.

# The Virtue of Chastity

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To define the virtue of chastity and distinguish it from continence regarding sexual desire and pleasure.
2. To consider how we can develop *ressentiment* toward morality in general and the ideals of chastity in particular.
3. To examine some common misperceptions of the virtue of chastity today.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Chastity (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “Teach Us to Love the True,” locate the tune DIADEMATA in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ ([www.hymntime.com/tch/](http://www.hymntime.com/tch/)) or Hymnary.org ([www.hymnary.org](http://www.hymnary.org)).

## Begin with a Story

What comes to mind when you hear the word “chastity”? It reminds Matt Fradd of a romantic evening when he danced with his wife in the streets of San Diego’s Little Italy, oblivious to all the passersby, while he played Dean Martin’s “Sway” on his iPhone. “It was silly and inelegant, but we made each other sway as our friend Dean Martin 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.... 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....

“The decision to not have sex was not the essential feature of chastity that evening,” Fradd notes. “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” (*Chastity*, p. 35).

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to guide your understanding of and appreciation for human sexuality.

## Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Luke 24:13-35 from a modern translation.

## Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

## Reflection

At the heart of Christian sexual ethics is not a dour set of rules, but a fetching trait: the virtue of chastity. This study defines chastity and distinguishes it from other, less winsome traits in the neighborhood, such as continence regarding sexual desire and pleasure. It also explores some reasons why many people find it difficult to appreciate the virtue of chastity today.

## Study Questions

1. As a virtue, chastity is a character trait rather than a particular action or type of action. It is a species of temperance – the virtue that tempers human desires for pleasures – in regard to sexual desire and pleasure. Matt Fradd describes chastity as “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.” Other descriptions include “the successful integration of sexuality within the person and thus the inner unity of man in his bodily and spiritual being” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*), and “Those who are chaste are fully at peace with their bodies and their sexuality” (Caroline Simon).

I think of chastity as the condition of peace when we know what is good and proper in regard to sexual desire and pleasure and this coincides exactly with what we physically desire and enjoy. Chastity is in contrast to sexual continence or self-control, where we know what is good but don't physically desire or enjoy it, though we are successful in controlling our behavior. The continent person struggles against wayward desires, and wins. The incontinent person struggles against wayward desires, but loses the battle. Chastity is pretty rare. Most of us struggle, more or less successfully, with wayward desires for sexual pleasure.

2. Matt Fradd, through the example of a young cola-fanatic, describes one way we can develop *ressentiment*. When other people tell us how we should think or act or feel, but they do not or cannot explain why we should live that way (or we are too immature to pay attention to their reasons), we might conclude they are just trying to control us. He suggests many people respond this way to moral guidance. A tendency toward individualism and relativism makes us ripe for believing our own way is as good as any other and no one has moral expertise to share. It is easy to distrust others and suspect their motives in giving advice.

*Ressentiment* is best averted by people giving good reasons for their advice within a context of trust. How well does your congregation help its members develop mutual trust and the requisite skills in scriptural reasoning and discernment on sexual ethics?

3. Form three small groups to review how Fradd responds to these three misconceptions about chastity: that it is a purely negative stance of refraining from sex (that is, abstinence), it revolves around repression of sexual desire, and it involves not thinking about sex.

To the idea that chastity is purely negative, he admits that chastity calls for abstinence during singleness and sometimes in marriage. However, it is not just abstinence because people can refrain from sex for the wrong reasons, and because chastity involves a positive attitude of reverence toward the beloved.

He admits that chastity involves repression (or rejection) of lust, but that is not the same as sexual desire. And he admits that chastity avoids constant obsession with sex and “slavering” over it, but obsessive slaving is not the same as thinking. Chastity promotes proper sexual desire and careful thinking about it.

4. Heidi Hornik says the archer centaur represents “wild, sensual instincts and passions” and the female figure represents reason, or knowledge of the good regarding sexual desire and pleasure. That the two figures are battling and the woman is subduing the centaur suggests this is a depiction of sexual continence rather than the virtue of chastity. However, the battle for control is ultimately in the service of virtue; Hornik explains, it is “an allegory of reason ruling over instinct in order to nurture virtue and control vice.”

## Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.