

Chastity

By Gary Henry

“There is no getting away from it: the old Christian rule is ‘Either marriage, with complete faithfulness to your partner, or else total abstinence.’ Chastity is the most unpopular of our Christian virtues” (C. S. Lewis).

I DO NOT BELIEVE C. S. LEWIS WAS EXAGGERATING. Chastity is indeed the most “unpopular” of the virtues – and if it was unpopular in Lewis’s day, it is much more so today. This is somewhat ironic, as Rosalie De Rosset observed: *“There is little praise for the consistently sexually controlled single. Too often, it is mixed with granulated pity or powdered condescension. Ironically, while discipline and self-control are encouraged and admired in scholarship, athletics, music, and ministry, their absence is strangely excused in sexual matters.”*

The basic meaning of chastity is “purity,” but we use the word in various ways. Most people think of chastity as virginity or abstinence from sexual intercourse before marriage. But it can also refer to celibacy, the choice to remain unmarried and forgo sexual intercourse altogether. And finally, chastity can mean virtuous character in general.

In all three of these meanings, the idea of purity is prominent. But let’s be careful. The impure thing that chastity abstains from is not sexual intercourse, but rather sexual intercourse with anyone other than the mate that one is rightfully married to at the present time. Chastity is about protecting the BOUNDARIES of sexual pleasure.

This principle is important not only for single people but also for married ones. Chastity, or purity, for single people means waiting until marriage, and for those who are married it means not violating the exclusiveness of the relationship. Sexual purity is important for every person in the world, whether married or unmarried. And chastity does not just have to do with physical actions – if we are to be chaste, purity of THOUGHT and MOTIVE must also be maintained.

Contrary to popular opinion, the argument in favor of chastity is not based on a low view of sex. Indeed, it is based on the highest view possible. It is not a denigration of sex to say that its purity should be protected; it is a concern to protect the “walls” that surround this, the most beautiful pleasure garden that a mortal being is capable of entering.

“There is a tendency to think of sex as something degrading; it is not, it is magnificent, an enormous privilege, but because of that the rules are tremendously strict and severe” (Francis Devas).