

# Friends With Benefits

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Written by Rev. Peter H. Holtvluwer



It is no secret that we live in an age of casual sex, at least in the western world. Ever since the sexual revolution of the 1960s, what used to happen behind closed doors has more and more come out into the open.

Today there are few secrets and little shame. Sex before marriage, sex outside of marriage, sex with multiple partners are all quite common and expected, even if not always appreciated by those caught in the middle. Heterosexual affairs, homosexual relationships and even bi-sexual liaisons have all hit the main stream. Not only is their “shock value” lost on a bombarded generation but worse these behaviours are becoming normal. Just watch any of the top 10 TV sitcoms to see any and usually all of these relationships cast in a positive light.

## **Friends...with Benefits**

All of this is sad and distressing to Christians but it is not new. What is new, relatively speaking, is a very insidious, seemingly harmless version of casual sex that has been called, “Friends with Benefits” (FWB). This can be defined in different ways but basically it is two persons who use their friendship for some form of sexual activity without developing any form of a loving relationship. There is an understanding going in that it’s just physical, merely pleasure and nothing more. There is no commitment of any kind. The sex is strictly voluntary with no strings attached. In street language, it is referred to as “hooking-up” for purely sexual satisfaction. All feelings for the other must be checked at the door. The idea is that friendship gets “extended” to include free sexual liaisons (i.e. the “benefits”) without any of the so-called baggage that comes with a regular, romantic relationship.

## **In the Church**

While we might be appalled at the immoral depths to which the world has fallen, we would do better to have a talk with our own teenagers and young adults about this matter. There is every indication that this worldly practice is seeping into the church, especially among our high-schoolers. Our young people are not only increasingly familiar with the FWB relationship but some of them are in the process of adopting a form of it they deem suitable for Christians. Yes, as disturbing as it may sound, some think that FWB can be done in an acceptable Christian manner. The reasoning goes along these lines: so long as FWB does not include actual sexual

intercourse, it is not unbiblical. There is a kind of sophistication in the argument. All young people in the church know that the Bible clearly condemns sexual intercourse outside of marriage (fornication) or having sex with someone other than your spouse (adultery). But Scripture does not out-rightly condemn things like sexual stimulation, petting, mutual masturbation, or oral sex. If the FWB relationship is limited to these and similar sexual activities, no biblical injunction is broken, it is thought. It appears that this “grey area” is being tapped for self-justification, to help ease the conscience of those who desire to engage in Friends with Benefits.

## **A Grey Area?**

But is the Bible really silent about this, shall we say, “peripheral” sexual activity? Such specific acts may not be itemized in any biblical list but numerous times God condemns perverse sexual behaviour of all kinds under the terms lewdness (e.g. Mark 7:22, NIV), sexual sin (e.g. 2 Cor 12:21) debauchery (e.g. Gal 5:19) and impurity (e.g. Eph 4:19). Any English dictionary will indicate that a wide-range of sexual acts are included in these terms.

More to the point, behind each of these English translations stands a separate Greek word. Having at least four words for sexual immorality tells us that the Greeks knew a lot about sexual activity, especially the perverse kind. The temple of Diana in Ephesus was known in Biblical times for its cultic prostitution. Aphrodite’s temple in Corinth was famous for its thousand prostitutes. The sexual looseness of the Greeks in Corinth was such that people turned the city name into a verb (“to Corinthinize” meant “to fornicate.”)

The activity condemned in these four words is not limited to merely sexual intercourse. It includes everything that could be expected of prostitutes. Prostitutes have always had many ways to satisfy their customers and the New Testament writers were aware of them from the surrounding culture. One Greek term, porneia, from which we get the English pornography, was a common, general term for any sexual sin and is repeatedly condemned in the Bible (e.g. 1 Cor 5:1). The command to refrain from even a “hint” of sexual impurity shows the high standard to which God calls His people as Paul makes clear in Ephesians 5:3, “But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people.” We need to see clearly that the sexual acts of FWB not only fall far short of God’s benchmark but, if not repented from, leave us exposed to God’s wrath (Col 3:5,6).

## **Lust**

But going beyond the various “activities” of FWB, is not the root of it also clearly spelled out by the Lord as a poison to be shunned? For what is going on in the heart of a man or a woman who wants to engage in sexual activity without any strings attached? Is it not lust? Is it not the self-centered and selfish desire to gratify one’s cravings? True, the desires of the partner will also be satisfied but as nothing more than a necessary completion of the agreed-upon transaction of pleasure between the “friends.” If one only takes and does not give, one will soon have no FWB. The bottom-line is that FWB is all about getting what you want, satisfying the lusts of your own flesh in the first place.

About lust the Bible is very clear. The Lord Jesus spoke of it in Matthew 5:48 as equal to adultery and thus damnable, “But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” The Apostle Peter pictures lust as part of the world’s way but totally alien to that of the Christian, “For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do-- living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry. They think it strange that you do not plunge with them into the same flood of dissipation, and they heap abuse on you. But they will have to give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead” (1 Peter 4:3-5). Notice too the warning that for all such activities and thoughts of the heart there will be a day of reckoning.

## **Sexual Enjoyment**

For all the apparent sophistication of the argument for FWB, it falls flat in the clear light of Scripture. The reasoning also loses all value when it is admitted that the “benefits” desired are entirely sexual in nature. All these desired activities are sexual activities and from the beginning God has placed all things sexual inside one relationship and only one relationship: marriage! They might be “peripheral” to intercourse, they might lead up to it, prepare for it or even be a substitute for it but all such activities are inherently sexual. For that reason, if they have a place anywhere, then in God’s eyes that place can only be inside the bond of holy marriage.

But then sex can be and should be enjoyed there! Our young people should be taught to refrain from sexual impurity of all kind but also to save their sexuality and anticipate its joys as God’s wedding gift to them and their future spouse! Let’s not let the world by default educate our children about sexuality through the media and the street, but let’s get to them first with a wholesome, God-pleasing explanation of the both the beauty of sex and the place of sex. The entire Song of Solomon is an ode to the pleasures of sexuality celebrated and enjoyed inside the marriage relationship. God gave sex for different reasons but one of them is certainly the enjoyment of husband and wife and this should be held out to our youth as a gift to cherish and look forward to!

Consider these sexual metaphors and allusions from Proverbs 5:15-20 and see how they promote pleasure within marriage: “Drink water from your own cistern, running water from your own well. Should your springs overflow in the streets, your streams of water in the public squares? Let them be yours alone, never to be shared with strangers. May your fountain be blessed, and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth. A loving doe, a graceful deer-- may her breasts satisfy you always, may you ever be captivated by her love. Why be captivated, my son, by an adulteress? Why embrace the bosom of another man's wife?” The Bible is not Victorian (prudish) any more than it is post-modern (loose). It is respectful in speaking about sexuality but it is also very real and so should we be.

## **Repentance and Renewal**

At the moment, FWB is not being discussed at too many dinner parties or coffee klatsches but we parents need to change that. We need to speak with our teens and young adults about both preventing this sin and – if they are caught up in it – turning away from it. In the latter case it is

important that we also share information with each other as parents and deal with this matter together. The young people involved in FWB do so together, supporting and influencing each other in this lifestyle. The negative, destructive group dynamic among such friends needs to be overcome by the positive, edifying team dynamic among parents seeking to guide them out of it. Parents must resist the urge to be protective of their child and jealous of the family reputation by choosing to deal with the problem internally only. It is far more effective if all parents involved can get on side and deal openly, decisively and constructively with their children. What is at stake here is the souls of our children and the glory of our God.

I would like to emphasize that our dealings with our children be constructive. It would be easy (and quite natural) as a parent to react to our child's sin solely in anger, disappointment, shame and embarrassment. We might take drastic action to discourage them from ever doing this again and guilt them into submission. But let us think beyond curbing the action to the greater need of converting the heart of our child. Let's walk them through what God reveals about sexuality and lead them – by God's grace – to repentance. Guilt should not be used as a weapon to keep the child "under thumb" but rather as a tool that drives the sinner into the arms of the Saviour to experience forgiveness.

And if God should grant repentance to our children, then we also have the opportunity (and the obligation) to lead them in the renewal of their life-style! We need to walk beside our son or daughter and point the way forward in sexual purity for the glory of God. Let's not despair about the depths of sin but let us cling to God's promises. The blood of God's Son is more than sufficient to cover also the sins of FWB and His Spirit more than powerful enough to overcome the lustful desires of the heart.

**Peter H. Holtvlüwer**  
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