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THE CHOICE: TO DO OR NOT TO DO IT

If you really love someone, is it all right to say “yes” to sex? Before you answer that question, back up a step. Most teens agree that you should not have sex with someone unless you love the person. But it is harder for teens to see that if you *really* love someone, it is often better to say “no” to sex—or at least to say “not yet.”

Love is a very elusive reality. As mentioned in Chapter 2, love can easily be confused with infatuation and even exploitation. How do you know if you *really* love someone? And even more puzzling, how do you know if another person *really* loves you? And how do you know if and when you love each other *enough* to express your love through sexual intercourse?

This is such an important question and has such far-reaching ramifications in your lives that both you and the person you love will want to be very sure your love is real before you engage in sexual activity.

Unfortunately, there is no simple paper and pencil test for real love. Real love can only be tested by life. When two people love each other enough to take the test *life* offers, they are ready to get married. Marriage isn't an absolute guarantee of love, of course, but it is a couple's best chance of knowing there is enough love—as well as enough commitment and responsibility—to sustain sexual intimacy.

A full sexual commitment is such an important decision that both civil law and Church law have a special process to publicize and formalize the commitment. That's what the marriage vow is—a formal commitment to accept all of the responsibilities that accompany a sexual union.

Among the most important responsibilities that follow from the sexual union is parenthood. In contemporary society, there is a false disconnect between sexual relationships and parenthood, which confuses the sexual thinking of today's young people. In

God's plan, sexual attraction has two primary purposes: love and procreation. According to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops:

The purpose of sexual desire is to draw man and woman together in the bond of marriage, a bond that is directed toward two inseparable ends: the expression of marital love and the procreation and education of children.¹

As young people mature in their ability to relate sexually in a comfortable and responsible manner, they also ought to be gradually developing the capacity to be loving and caring parents. The decision to be sexually active should mean that you and the person you love should both be ready to assume the duties of parenthood.

So what if you really *do* love each other, but you haven't known each other very long, or you haven't discussed some very serious values, or you're not sure you can trust the other person completely, or you're not ready for a permanent commitment, or you aren't fully ready to be a parent? What if the relationship is developing, but still has a long way to go? What about sex then? Can't sex help to keep the relationship growing?

Contrary to what most of popular culture—especially the media—tells you, the answer is *no*. Statistical evidence shows that sex prior to marriage is more likely to destroy a relationship than to deepen it. Sex can trick you into thinking that intense infatuation or even exploitation is real love.

Once a couple adds sexual intimacy to their relationship, having sex can become the central focus of their lives. The other facets of their relationship often stop developing. Sooner or later one or both persons begins to feel trapped—by jealousy, or guilt, or lack of communication, or secrecy, or infidelity, or pregnancy. A relationship that may have had the potential to grow into love can be sidetracked by sex. What begins as love can end by deteriorating into exploitation.

Which brings us back to our original question: If you really love someone, is it all right to say "yes" to sex?

Unless you and the person you love are ready to take life's test of love, marriage, and parenthood, the answer is definitely **NO**.

When you have a special relationship with someone, and you really want that relationship to deepen and mature into love, promise yourself and each other that your relationship will *not* include

sexual intercourse or any of the foreplay that leads to sexual intercourse until you have sealed your relationship with marriage.

The best decision is to say "no" to sex now so you can more freely, truly, and responsibly say "yes" later.

Note to Parents

Ultimately, your children must decide for themselves whether to have sex, when, and with whom. This chapter points out that making the decision to say "no" to sex before marriage is the most loving thing a person can do for himself or herself and for the one he or she loves. The reasons for this are presented in a variety of ways in this chapter. It is our hope that the message is made clear to the teens—the message that real love can only be tested by life, and that marriage, though not an absolute guarantee of love, is the best chance for a couple to know that there is enough love and commitment in their relationship to sustain sexual intimacy.

Teenage Sex: Reasons to Say "Yes" or "No"

Though the best decision is to say no to sex until marriage, the pressures you face in making a choice to have sex or not do not go away. Despite the correctness of saving sex until marriage, sooner or later you will have to decide for yourself whether you will say yes or no to premarital sex.

Obviously some teenagers are already saying yes. Many feel pressured into having sex. They think they have to do it to be popular, or to win or keep someone's love, or to prove something to someone.

Some teens have sex to make a third person jealous or to get back at their parents. Some are just curious and want to find out what it's like. Some use sex for comfort or reassurance. Many teens are drunk or high when they have sex. Some have sex just for fun. And some are cruelly forced into having sex.

Many teens say it's all right to have sex if you really love each other. But many teens have a difficult time articulating the meaning of true love and few are ready for the kind of permanent, responsible, long-term commitment that love requires.

The good news about teenagers and sex is that it is really not true that "everyone is doing it." As recent statistics point out, nearly half of junior and seniors in high school say they have never had sex. And these positive numbers are increasing, as more and more teens clearly choose to say no to sex until they are married.

Some teens choose not to have sex because they want to avoid pregnancy, AIDS, and other sexually transmitted diseases. Some feel that a heavy sexual involvement would interfere with their education or their future plans.

Some teens are afraid of being physically intimate with another person, or afraid of getting caught, or afraid of feeling guilty afterward. Some have been hurt by sex in the past and don't want to be hurt again.

Sexuality is ordered to the conjugal love of man and woman. In marriage the physical intimacy of the spouses becomes a sign and pledge of spiritual communion. Marriage bonds between baptized persons are sanctified by the sacrament.

—CCC, 2360

Many teens have strong religious convictions that influence how they feel about sex. They see sex as a precious gift from God and want to live their lives in accordance with God's will. Some teens choose not to have sex because they love the other person too much to risk hurting him or her. Some say no because they want to save the gift of sex for the person they will marry.

Most teens hope that they will be part of a happy, permanent marriage someday. They dream of saying a yes that will last forever to a very special someone. One of the best ways for teens to make that dream come true is to say no to sex now.

Love Waits

The following is a definition of true love by the Christian Action Council.

Love is patient . . . Love starts with being friends—with taking time to get to know each other. It's sharing the good and bad times together.

Love is kind . . . Love wants to do the best thing for another person. It's doing thoughtful things for someone else. Love never demands something that will harm you or the other person.

Love will never cross the line between what's right and wrong . . . It's right to care about someone. It's wrong to put each other in danger of having to deal with hard choices . . . choices that could change both your lives, your goals and plans forever. Having sex before marriage may feel right for the moment. But the possible costs of an unexpected pregnancy, abortion, and sexually transmitted diseases—as well as the deep hurts that can come from a broken relationship—outweigh the feelings of the moment. The feelings are temporary; their consequences are long-lasting.

Love waits . . . All good things are worth waiting for. Waiting to have sex until marriage is a mature decision to control your desires. Waiting allows you to build strong friendships . . . to treat yourself and others as unique and valuable individuals . . . and to treat sex as something exciting and special to be shared with one person for a lifetime. If you are getting to know someone—or are in a relationship—remember: If it's love, love waits.²

The Real-Love Test

The Real-Love Test is designed to help you discover if a relationship is really love or not. You will be writing your "grades" on a report card, but the Real-Love Test isn't really about written grades. It is about being honest with yourself and with someone you consider to be a boyfriend or girlfriend.

If you are "in love" right now, use the test to "grade" your current relationship. If you have a boyfriend or girlfriend, you should be able to sit down and discuss each item with him or her. If you can't talk about these things, that is probably a clear sign that you are a long way from passing the test.

If you aren't in love right now, read through the test anyway, applying it to a past relationship or some other relationship you know about. Then put the test away in a safe place so that you can find it the next time you fall in love.

Give your relationship an A, B, C, D, or F grade for each item on this test.

- **The Time Test** You've known each other for a long time, long enough to discover the many facets of the other's personality, to know the other's interests and values, to realize his or her strengths and weaknesses, to see how he or she deals with all kinds of life situations.
- **The Chemistry Test** Your whole being responds to the presence of the other. You're captivated by the way the person walks, talks, smiles, listens—even the way he or she smells. This is the easiest test to pass, and the hardest, because you can't make it happen. One day you discover it in yourself and you desperately hope that the other person feels it too.
- **The Communication Test** You can talk easily with the other person about many things. You share your thoughts and your feelings openly. You work through your disagreements and conflicts. You listen to one another and each try to understand the other's point of view.
- **The Friendship Test** You are really good friends. You like to spend time together doing many different kinds of activities. You're comfortable with each other and like being with each other's friends and families.
- **The Approval Test** The people who know you best, your parents and your friends, approve of the other person. They can see that he or she brings out the best in you. They feel that you are a better person because of this relationship.

- **The Respect Test** You are considerate and courteous in dealing with each other. You respect each other's friends, family, morals, and religious convictions. You don't use manipulation or blackmail to get your own way.
- **The Vision Test** Far from being blind, your love for the other person helps you to see very well just what kind of person he or she is. You know all about the person, good points and bad, strengths and weaknesses. You understand and accept the real person, the one behind the mask. Your relationship also helps you to see yourself in a new way.
- **The Jealousy Test** You are not possessive of the person's time or affection. You give the other person space to do things and go places without you. You encourage him or her to have other friends, both male and female.
- **The Values Test** You share common values, morals, and priorities on most of the important things in life. You discuss value questions often. You respect the other's position when it differs from yours, but you aren't afraid to challenge ideas, actions, and attitudes that you can't accept.
- **The Trust Test** You have complete confidence in the other person. You have learned from experience that you can depend on him or her to be truthful and open with you. You know that he or she will follow through on promises and commitments and support you in times of trouble.
- **The Responsibility Test** You are aware of any risks that might be involved in your relationship. You are willing and able to accept full responsibility for the consequences of your actions with one another. You will not expose your friend to unnecessary dangers of any kind.
- **The Parenthood Test** You and the other person are both open to the possibility of conceiving a child, and both of you are willing and able to assume all of the responsibilities of parenthood.
- **The Prayer Test** You pray frequently for and with each other. You see God in each other and in your

love relationship. You seem to be growing closer to God because of your love for one another. You respect one another's religious commitments and go to church together when you can.

- **The Real World Test** You are free to love one another—free from former vows and commitments, from psychological and physical impediments, from addictions. You are absolutely certain that neither of you is infected with HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, or has any other sexually transmitted disease. You are realistic about the special problems connected with any differences in age, race, family, religion, background.
- **The Tomorrow Test** You are each confident that the other will be there for you tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow. You are patient with each other's efforts to learn to love well. You realize that the beautiful secrets of sexual intimacy can be discovered only in a setting that provides permanence and continuity.
- **The Commitment Test** You have pledged your commitment to one another publicly in the presence of witnesses. Your relationship has been blessed by God and by your Church in a wedding. You have signed a legal contract promising to be true to one another for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, until death.

Sex without love *and* the commitment of marriage will not make you happy. Without love and a committed marriage relationship, sex is a source of problems, worry, guilt, heartache, and disappointment. Your best assurance that your relationship is really love is marriage.

If you *really love* one another, say "no" to sex until you have sealed your love in marriage.

Love Is Not Blind

Love is always patient and kind

It is never jealous

Love is never boastful or conceited

It is never rude or selfish

It does not take offense

And is not resentful
Love takes no pleasure in other
people's sins
But delights in the truth
It is always ready to excuse
To trust
To hope
And to endure whatever comes
In short
There are three things that last
Faith
Hope
And Love
And the greatest of these
Is
Love

1 CORINTHIANS 13:4-7, 13 (JERUSALEM BIBLE)

Personal Journal

- What is your own definition of "real love?"
- What do you feel is the bottom-line reason for saying "no" to sex before marriage?
- What did the Real-Love Test reveal about a relationship you are currently in, were once in, or one that you know about?
- Write some of the lyrics from a favorite song or songs that express for you the meaning of real love.