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# Whose Sex is it Anyway?

## 1 Corinthians 7:1-5<sup>9</sup>

*Russ Kennedy*

Christians struggle with sex.

We have already talked much from 1 Corinthians 6 about the trouble the church was having dealing with immorality. Paul had to exhort them to discipline an immoral man. He further had to instruct them and exhort them to godly purity.

The Chapel Counseling Ministry has now been serving the Lord and God's people for over 30 years. I have been involved in counseling most of my ministry. Over 40 years, some of the most difficult shepherding and counseling I have done is in the area of marital intimacy. There is so much misunderstanding, ignorance and plain ungodliness that goes on in the marriage bed.

Paul, even as a single man<sup>1</sup>, had to direct, counsel and advise churches on these matters. The church at Corinth lived in a cesspool of immorality of every imaginable sort. Some in the church struggled to extract their lives from their past. Some were living marvelously transformed lives. Some, were riding the pendulum from license to legalism, from immorality to marriage abstinence.

In this section, Paul is going to address a number of issues relating to marriage, singleness, widowhood, divorce and remarriage. We begin with what for some is an awkward discussion of sex in marriage. Paul turns a number of worldly and cultural norms un-side-down.

May the Lord have our hearts as well as our ears and eyes as we tackle this subject.

### **The Troubling Questions (v. 1)**

The church at Corinth not only had some troubling sins, but also some troubling questions. Here is the first one we face.

<sup>1</sup> Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman."

#### ***Their Concern***

Because of the prevailing carnality and immorality in the culture around them, some in the church had reverted to legalism and mysticism. So there were divisions in the

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church over this issue. It appears that some were advocating for a higher spirituality to be obtained, not just by celibacy as singles, but also as marrieds.

Translations often are interpreting when they render this text. It reads literally, "It is good for a man not to touch a woman." So does that mean no holding hands? No holy kiss? No Christian hug? Does that mean in marriage too? The NIV is almost certainly incorrect when it renders this, "It is good for a man not to marry..."? Is that the question? Wouldn't the simple answer to that be Genesis 2, "It is NOT good for a man to be alone..."

Paul is quoting the Corinthians to indicate the question he is dealing with. He is neither affirming nor disaffirming their view. He has just completed a clear command to moral purity and fleeing immorality in Chapter 6. Now, he is turning to the married in the church and addressing the question some have: *If celibacy is good in singleness, is it also good or even a higher state in marriage?"*

### **Our Concerns**

This question raises some difficult concerns on our part.

#### **With the question of celibacy in marriage.**

We listen to this question and frankly find ourselves going, "You have to be kidding..." However, in many Christian circles this becomes, if not a formal, at least a functional reality. This is particularly true among ladies who feel sullied or think of intimacy as dirty. Along with many mystics and pietists, they say, "A greater spiritual purity can be achieved by never being sullied by the gross physical realities of sex."

#### **With the subject of sex in marriage.**

I will speak plainly about this subject. Yes I can and will use the word "intimacy" in this talk and am mostly using it to refer to having sex. And I will often simply use the word for sex. I hope not to offend any of you - but I also want to be very clear what we are talking about.

I grew up in a kind of Christianity that simply never talked about intimacy in a positive way. It was only addressed to singles and of course, rightly so, as a resounding no. But, the Biblical truths about the joys and difficulties of intimacy in marriage were almost never addressed. It was taboo. The result is that many, many women in particular struggled with being used and abused. And sometimes there was total physical withdrawal from intimacy that created many attendant difficulties. In my travels, I find in some Christian circles today, this is still a big problem.

This is a subject the Bible addresses and therefore we will address in our teaching, preaching and counseling. Intimacy in marriage has a level of privacy between a couple. But it is also clearly addressed in the Bible. So, we will speak where the Bible does. We will help couples in shepherding and counseling as we can. But the idea that the Bible has little to say and shepherds should have nothing to say is not what the Bible does.

## **With our struggles with sex in marriage.**

Here is a list of the common problems that occur in marital intimacy.

We have *worldly and unrealistic expectations informed by pornography*, visual or verbal. Men expect their wives to be or perform what they have seen. Women's hearts are shaped by explicit romance novels and stories. So, your spouse never measures up.

We have *unbiblical notions about sex* from legalistic religious backgrounds. Often there is either a total embracing or a total rejecting of the legalism. The biblical third-way is often rejected.

We have ongoing *marital conflict* that affects intimacy. It is very difficult to be intimate with someone who regularly criticizes, critiques, corrects, condemns, controls, and castigates you.

We are unaware, or unwilling to *acknowledge or accept the differences between men and women's arousal* in intimacy. We think that what is good for us is what will be good for them. And some men are just ogres when it comes to this. Just the simple difference between visual and verbal with men and women is important to recognize.

*Selfishness in intimacy* overflows from a *need* model rather than a *give* model. Sex becomes all about my needs, my temptations, my desires, my happiness whether in the demand for it or in the avoidance of it.

*Fornication before marriage* ends up corrupting intimacy in the marriage. This can be an unseen and unrecognized problem for many couples.

Past *abuse or rape* creates fear, distaste, withdrawal, denial of intimacy. Sometimes, it creates an excessive desire that is seeking the comfort and companionship denied when used by the abuser.

*Substitute companionships* that make sex mechanical, resentful, dutiful rather than a high physical expression of deep soul union. Children, family or friends are closer to us than our spouses with insidious troubles coming with it.

Now, obviously, Paul's instruction here does not address all of these issues. But it does set a Christian context for intimacy in marriage so that shepherds and counselors can help if needed.

## The Biblical Necessity (v. 2)

Paul responds to the Corinthian question by pressing a Biblical necessity.

<sup>2</sup> But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband.

### *Its Reason*

We need to be careful here. This sentence begins with a "but". So it does not stand alone. Paul is not saying that marriage exists to prevent immorality. That would be absurd. As one commentator says, "So, he does not lay down here the ground of marriage, as though it were 'ordained for a remedy against sin.'" [Hendrickson] He is not making avoiding sin the reason or the basis for marriage. Nor is Paul advocating for every person being married. It is desirable, but it is not commanded.

### *Its Requirement*

Rather, he is saying that because of the prevailing immorality in their culture, married couples should "have" each other. This is a euphemism for sex. Over against advocating for celibacy in marriage as a higher level of spirituality, Paul commands that married people be intimate.

Now, the brevity of this statement would still recognize where intimacy is not possible. This statement is against a particular view advocating abstinence in marriage as the norm.

## The Godly Mutuality (v. 3-4)

Paul's answer to all these troubles is godly mutuality.

<sup>3</sup> The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. <sup>4</sup> For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does.

### *The Command (v. 3)*

The command is quite simple and is stated in the positive. Husbands, give your wives what God has granted them with the right to have. Wives, give to your husbands what God has granted them with the right to have.

Notice too that the command is mutual and equal. While the physical need or sexual drives may be different, both husbands and wives have an obligation to the other. Paul treats this as a simple debt to be fulfilled.

This command can be stated in its negative. Husbands and wives, do not withhold yourself from giving yourself to your spouse. Now, Paul is speaking about over the long term, not just tonight. In other words, this command is about a continual withholding that never shares or gives. I do not think that Paul had in mind that anytime either of the spouses' wants intimacy, that this verse is quoted. In other words the command here is general, not specific to each and every demand.

### ***The Cause (v. 4)***

The reason for this responsibility is in mutual submission and authority. In marriage there is a shared authority and submission in the area of intimacy. In this area the man does not have headship per se. He is not "in charge" or has sole authority over his wife in their intimacy life. In this issue, God has placed both spouses under submission to the other.

But here he plainly declares that in respect to sex between a husband and wife, there is complete mutuality. Each partner has authority over the body of his or her spouse, and both submit themselves to one another. Thus they experience Godly mutuality. *This resolves the problem of equality and shared authority.*

So what does this mean? Does this mean that either one can simply command the other to have sex whenever they want? In our culture most women would laugh at such a thing. Many men are hoping that is what I meant. Both attitudes are totally wrong. In the context of companionship and love, there would need to be little recourse to this text. An overbearing, authoritative, self-focused man using this text to force his wife to have sex is just using the Bible to justify the physical act of sex without the loving intimacy God intended. That is not the intention of this text. I want to be heard by all: a spouse using their authority to demand sex *now* is being wicked and evil. A spouse refusing over time to be intimate is also being foolish and sinful. You are using authority for sinful personal gratification.

This text is intended to deal with the issue at hand, the question being asked. Celibacy is not allowed in marriage partially because there is no place for unilateral demand for or withholding of sex.

This whole text turns the worlds' evil thinking about sex on its head. The world says that sex is about our own personal satisfaction and gratification. In its worst expressions, sex simply uses another person, an image on a screen, a scene in novel or movie for sexual release. It makes sex about recreation or reward. Do something for me and I will give you a treat tonight. And the poor dumb ox goes for it.

The world also views sex as conquest. It may be through sensual allurements or through physical intimidation. It may be through casual recreation or strategic entrapment. But the point is sex is the moment of conquest, of having the other person, of owning them and making the person.

The Bible's view of love and intimacy is all about giving, not getting. It is focused on the other person's desires, needs and delights. If both spouses have a godly attitude and are mutually focused on the other then each will be satisfied regardless of the outcome.

I can say often in my shepherding and counseling over intimacy matters, this has been the issue. One or both spouses were so focused on themselves that they refused sex or demanded sex *because of their own selfishness*. I have never counseled a couple where one or both were giving themselves too much (well, maybe being a little inappropriate, but that's another matter.)

I want to remind you that this is not the only guide we have for marital sex. Some of the very few imperatives in the book of Proverbs are relating to intimacy in marriage. They often address our attitudes, our focus towards our spouses.

Also, we have a wonderful book called the Song of Solomon or *The Canticles*. In that poetic drama, we see the beginning, advancement, wedding, consummation and conflict around intimacy in marriage. It also has much deep reflection in it on the things that hurt and harm our intimacy.

## **The Spiritual Exception (v. 5)**

Paul also recognizes that there is an exception for special times of spiritual exercise.

<sup>5</sup> Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.

Notice that this command is simply an extension of the prior one. Give your spouse what is due. Do not deprive your spouse of what is due. But if there is going to be a period of abstinence, then there are simple requirements that must be met.

### ***It must be mutually agreed upon.***

Even for spiritual exercise such as prayer, there can be no unilateral withdrawal. If one spouse is not willing, then the spiritual exercise may continue but intimacy must continue. Paul's correction is aimed at the person who would use spirituality and mystical pursuits as a means to unilaterally avoid sex.

### ***The agreement must be entered into beforehand.***

There is no, "Oh by the way..." The couple should sit down and talk about what, why and how long. It is impossible to have a mutual decision if there is no mutual discussion.

### ***It is still describe as depriving one another.***

Though it is by mutual agreement, the responsibility in giving to one another is so compelling that when it is withheld it is still characterized as "depriving". One other aspect of the word is that it reflects an extended period of time. So this is not mutual agreement about tonight or tomorrow, but about a week or something longer.

### ***It is for a set purpose.***

The injunction here is for the purpose of prayer. This is what was needed in the church at Corinth. This is not the only reason or purpose. But there must be a mutually agreed upon purpose. Extended illness or physical incapacity may be a purpose. Abstinence during menstruation may be another. Extended travel for business or ministry. It is noteworthy that Paul mentions that Peter had the right and did take his sister-spouse about on his travels. That is commendable when it is possible.

### ***It is for a limited time***

Open-ended abstinence even by mutual agreement is not permitted. When the mutual consent is entered into, there should be some clear idea of when it is going to end.

### ***It is ended with intentionality to be pleasing to each other and to God.***

If you take this sentence out of its context, you could accuse Paul of an absurdity. Of course to end abstinence, you have to “come together again”. That is not the point. It actually sets up the next phrase. But it also has the idea of joyfully and gladly coming together with all that the text has taught – pleasing one another and pleasing to God.

### ***It is a time where Satan may take advantage, particularly for those who do not have good self-control.***

Paul alerts his readers to the presence of Satan, who seeks to exploit human weakness by tempting either the husband or the wife into committing adultery. So while this is permitted, it is also attended by certain difficulties and dangers. Those of us who travel for extended seasons, know what Paul is talking about here. So we must be alert to Satan’s devious devices to destroy God’s people.

Hendrickson summarizes this for us so well. “Except perhaps by mutual consent for a specified time that you may have time for prayer.” Paul allows abstinence from marital relations on three conditions: first, if both husband and wife agree to do so; next, if both concur that abstinence is for a limited period; and third, if both use this time for prayer. Paul permits this exception to the rule but forbids anyone to impose involuntary restrictions on his or her spouse. (Hendrickson)

## **The Personal Correction (v. 6-7)**

The next sentence serves as a bridge between the section on marriage and the section on singleness. It also bookends the opening.

<sup>6</sup> Now as a concession, not a command, I say this. <sup>7</sup> I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another.

The church at Corinth was advocating celibacy as a higher spiritual norm. Marriage was a concession. Rather, Paul says singleness is a concession not a command. They have inverted the norm.

The first word, “but,” is an adversative that we understand as a qualifier of Paul’s preceding comment: “Then come together again ...” (v. 5c). That is, verse 6 should be linked to the immediately preceding verse and not to the entire context (vv. 2–5). Paul is not saying that he regards marriage as a concession. Nor is he saying that intimacy in marriage is a concession. Rather, he allows a temporary abstinence that has the consent of both spouses. With the demonstrative pronoun “this”, Paul refers not to marriage, which he fully endorses, but to the exception to the rule of marital rights (v. 5b). Marriage in which these rights are honored is Paul’s norm.

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## Reflect and Respond

Good summary by Barclay...

This is another manifestation of that line of thought which looked on the body and its instincts as essentially evil. Paul declares a supremely great principle. Marriage is a partnership. The husband cannot act independently of the wife, nor the wife of the husband. They must always act together. The husband must never regard the wife simply as a means of self-gratification. The whole marriage relationship, both in its physical and spiritual sides, is something in which both are to find their gratification and the highest satisfaction of all their desires. In a time of special discipline, in a time of long and earnest prayer, it might be right to set aside all physical pleasures; but it must be by mutual agreement and only for a time, or it simply creates a situation which gives temptation an easy chance. (Barclay)

If God made male and female, created them sexual beings, gave to each one power over the body of the other party, and instituted marriage, then forced and permanent abstinence within wedlock is contrary to God's design. In short, when one partner defrauds the other, he or she violates God's creational ordinance (Gen. 1:28; 2:24) and, instead of being spiritual, is sinful.

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<sup>11</sup> I am aware of the discussion over whether or not Paul was ever married. His contemporaries knew. The Bible does not plainly say so. The evidence that he must have been married because he was a Rabbi and a member of the Sanhedrin is pretty thin and unconvincing. Certainly, through the time of Paul's writing ministry, he was single. He makes several statements to that effect. We should not be bothered by a single man, whether he has ever experienced marriage or not, giving command and counsel through inspiration by the Holy Spirit.