

Life Together

*Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?
If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him.
For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.
(1 Corinthians 3:16-17. ESV)*

*And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same
image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.
(2 Corinthians 3:18. ESV)*

Marriage And Sexuality Among Believers

January 11th, 2015

1 Corinthians 7:1-9

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Introduction:

Good morning! Open your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 7:1; that's on page 955 in your pew Bible. As I mentioned last week, the fundamental problem with the Christian church in Corinth was worldliness. There was way too much CORINTH in the church. Paul had already sent them a letter strongly rebuking them for engaging in sexual immorality, they wrote back to him for clarification and this letter – now Paul's second – is organized around both their questions and the report that was given orally by the messengers. Paul interviewed the messengers and he discovered that the Corinthians didn't ask some questions that they should have and so he writes a letter addressing a variety of problems all having to do with the worldliness of the church. Chapters 4-7 deal with sexual worldliness. In fact some scholars refer to 1 Corinthians 4-7 as the Apostle Paul's Holiness Code¹. He is trying to teach these folks a distinctly Christian and Biblical approach to sexuality. He's talked about incest, adultery, homosexuality, sex with prostitutes and now here, he talks about marriage, celibacy and divorce. We'll talk about the first of those two concerns this morning and then look at the issue of divorce next week.

I think our best approach for this morning will be to explain the cultural background that Paul is clearly addressing before reading what he has to say by way of correction, first concerning

¹ As per Paul Barnett, 1 Corinthians (Fearn: Christian Focus, 2000), 106; an allusion to Leviticus 18-20.

marriage in verses 1-5 and then later celibacy in verses 6-9. Along the way we'll point out some principles by way of application. Let's look first at the cultural background.

Cultural Background And Confusion:

When people come to Christ they always come from somewhere else. Part of how we grow in Christ is through self-understanding and cultural exegesis. We look at everything we believe and we ask some questions. Why do I believe that? Do I believe that because it is in the Bible? Do I believe that because my mommy told me that? Do I believe that because I saw it on TV? Do I believe that because I learned it in school? Anything you believe that you received from culture you need to hold loosely and you need to be prepared to let it go if you discover that it stands at odds with Scripture. That's how Christians grow – they become renewed in their thinking.

Romans 12:2 says:

Do not be conformed to this world, but **be transformed by the renewal of your mind**, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Romans 12:2 ESV)

The Corinthians here have done a very good thing. They have taken their default cultural beliefs to the Apostle Paul and they have ASKED for correction. Verse 1 in chapter 7 says:

Now concerning the matters about which you wrote... (1 Corinthians 7:1 ESV)

They wrote to Paul and they said: "We are believing some things which might not be correct – please comment where necessary". Pray God, grant us Christians today who would do the same! It is very easy to be critical of the Corinthians – they do at times seem comically immature. They sleep with prostitutes, they have sex with their in-laws they speak in tongues non stop during the worship service and they have visions of heaven that properly belong in a Philadelphia Cream Cheese commercial – these people are pretty messed up! BUT. They KNOW they are messed up, they know they are living in a messed up culture filled with all kinds of crazy particularly with respect to issues of sex, marriage and gender and so they take their wrong ideas to the Apostle Paul for correction. The Evangelical church needs to relearn that lesson fast! On this score, they are way ahead of us.

Now concerning the unique source of their confusion, let me quote Ciampa and Rosner who do an excellent job of summarizing this difficult issue:

In Paul's day there was a very influential debate raging about whether it was appropriate to enjoy sex for pleasure or inspired by passion, or if it was only appropriate when engaged in for the procreation of children. Evidence suggests many married Roman men regularly engaged in recreational (or hedonistic) sex with people other than their wives and only (or primarily) engaged in procreational sex with their wives. Some Corinthians may have interpreted his warning about sexual immorality in terms of that Greco-Roman debate and concluded, along with late Stoic and Pythagorean moralists, that all recreational sex should be avoided and that even within marriage sex should take place only when procreation was intended.²

Many men in Roman culture believed that you should only have sex with your wife when you were trying to produce an heir; they protected her virtue, as it were by only engaging in practical, procreative sex with her. However, at the same time, they felt no moral qualms about engaging in recreational sex with all manner of other people. They go on to say that the husband might have recreational sex with a wide variety of people:

Options included female and male household slaves, street prostitutes, consorts (call girls), and adulterous affairs with married women.³

A typical Roman man had sex for pleasure with his slaves, male and female, prostitutes, consorts and other married women but NOT with his wife less it impact on her virtue. With his wife, he only had sex when he needed an heir. That was the Roman view on sex – which I think we can all agree, is seriously messed up. Now these folks start to become Christians and they are trying to figure out how sex and Christianity go together. They see that Paul is celibate and they wonder if that is the preferred Christian way and so they write to him asking if their conclusion on the matter is correct:

“It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.” (1 Corinthians 7:1 ESV)

Paul had been very upset about sexual immorality, Paul was celibate, should we therefore withdraw from sexuality, limiting sex to the necessity of producing heirs. In a nutshell, should we treat sex as a necessary evil? Is all enjoyment of sex – all recreational sex – to be avoided, even in marriage?

²Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary. Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 270.

³Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary. Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 367.

Now, I want to be very careful here in this message to present the facts as best I understand them and to make sure that you know that you are getting fair and even Biblical exegesis and not simply my opinions foisted onto the text and so I'm going to provide far more quotations than I normally do. I want you to know that I'm not making this up so let me summon a witness to this interpretation. Linguists believe that in their quotation they have used a cultural idiom. We have these in English. We have ways of speaking about sex that indicate that pleasure is in view and we have ways of speaking about sex when emotion is in view. When emotion is in view we talk about "making love". You can guess what some of the other expressions are. Here the Corinthians have used an expression that seems to be asking, should we avoid the type of sex that is physical and pleasurable. Linguists think it might best be translated as follows – I'm going to put it on the screen and let you read it for yourself:

To render the euphemism into idiomatic, if indelicate, English, the Corinthians were saying something like: "it is good for a man not to bed / bang / shag a woman."⁴

That's their question, that's their cultural confusion now as baby Christians concerning sex. Understanding that, we are ready to look at Paul's pastoral teaching. He is meeting them in their confusion and he is leading them into a Biblical and properly Christian understanding of sex. Let's begin with what he says about marriage; we'll read verses 1-5:

Setting The Record Straight With Respect To Marriage

¹ Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman."² But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband.³ The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband.⁴ 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.⁵ 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. (1 Corinthians 7:1-5 ESV)

There are I think three obvious principles in this passage that Paul offers as a necessary Christian correction. Let me draw them out for you.

Principles:

⁴Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary. Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 275.

1. The best guard against sexual temptation is frequent and generous sexual expression within marriage.

Now, Paul is not saying that this is the REASON for marriage. Paul knows all about Genesis 1 and 2, and he himself says very exalted things about the nature and reason for marriage in Ephesians 5. Paul is not saying everything he believes about marriage in these 5 verses he is answering a question. And in answering the question he says that God gives us sex within marriage to meet our physical needs and to protect us from temptation. We should notice that Paul is not saying anything NEW in terms of Judaism or the Bible, though it would sound very new to people being saved out of Greco-Roman culture. Jews already understood that enjoying marital sex was good and healthy thing. Consider some of what we find in The Book of Proverbs:

¹⁵ Drink water from your own cistern, flowing water from your own well... ¹⁸ Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in the wife of your youth, ¹⁹ a lovely deer, a graceful doe. Let her breasts fill you at all times with delight; be intoxicated always in her love. ²⁰ Why should you be intoxicated, my son, with a forbidden woman and embrace the bosom of an adulteress? (Proverbs 5:15–20 ESV)

Do you want to live free from sexual temptation? Love having sex with your wife – that’s good Old Testament Jewish council and Paul is teaching it to newly converted Christian Romans.

Now let me explain to you that this implies that getting married young is a wise safeguard against sexual immorality. I have got myself in trouble a few times in this church by affirming young people in their desire to get married before their parents and others thought they should. Now, to be clear, I’ve never counselled dishonouring parents. But when young people – 19, 20, 21 year old people have come to me expressing a desire to get married and indicating that they do not yet have parental permission I have agreed to talk to parents and to try and get them to see that the desire of their child is a good one. It’s a good thing that your child wants to marry another believer and to be holy and righteous before the Lord. Why does that bother you? The answer is usually because they haven’t finished university or they haven’t yet secured a high paying job. Last I checked, neither of those ambitions are commended highly in the Bible. I’m not saying you shouldn’t get a university degree – I’ve got a couple myself – I’m not saying you shouldn’t get a job – I have a job and I’m very thankful for it. I’m saying the Bible doesn’t so commend those things that we would want to play fast and loose with our sexual morality. I got married young. I was still doing my Master’s degree. Shauna Lee and I had no money. Our combined

income in our first year of marriage was \$1300 a month and about half of that went towards schooling. Our parents were not subsidizing our stupidity – we were on our own, living in Shauna Lee’s uncle’s basement but we were having a blast and we were obeying the Lord. We were poor, but not desperately poor and we were happy. Happy and obedient is probably better than rich and immoral. Moms and dads, if you have young adults who want to get married to other believers, you should probably thank God and get out of the way.

Now, let me clarify what I mean by some of the words I used in that first principle heading.

By frequent I mean FREQUENT. The Jews were very specific about this sort of thing, they even made lists in the Talmud about how often certain people should have sex and it seems like when you read it the answer is all the time, except when your work forbids it. For example they said that an independently wealthy person who doesn’t need to work should have sex every day but a camel driver could only expect to have sex once a month because of his many travels!

Unfortunately the Bible isn’t quite so specific, it just says that there should never be more than a few days between occasions and even those pauses must be by mutual consent. So frequent means frequent.

Secondly I have used the word “generous” because Paul describes sex as a giving of your body to the other. In fact Paul says that the husband has authority over the wife’s body and she has authority over his – that statement, that the wife likewise has authority over the husband’s body is considered by scholars to be absolutely revolutionary – nobody had ever said anything like that before Paul.

The marked mutuality of Paul’s comments (the husband has authority over his wife’s body and she has authority over his) was, however, revolutionary in the ancient world where patriarchy was the norm. For the husband to have authority over his wife’s body was nothing special.... Paul’s following statement affirming the reverse, that “the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does,” clearly pointed to a radical and unprecedented restriction on the husbands’ sexual freedom. It communicates, negatively, his obligation to refrain from engaging in sexual relations with anyone other than his wife and, positively, his obligation to fulfill his marital duty to provide her with sexual pleasure and satisfaction.⁵

That leads me to my second principle:

⁵Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary. Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 280-281.

2. Sex within marriage should be given NOT when both want it, but when either wants it.

It is very common today to hear that sex should only be given in a marriage when both desire it – this is the new definition of consent. The Bible says something totally different. The Bible says that WITHIN A MARRIAGE sex is to be given whenever EITHER wants it. The one has authority over the body of the other; they may only abstain by MUTUAL CONSENT. The wife could not say to the husband: “I desire to fast today so you will have to sleep on the couch” – No! Only when both felt a compulsion towards a time of fasting and prayer could sex be set aside. Otherwise, they were to give it as wanted to each other. It is a way that husbands and wives serve one another. That teaching needs to be recaptured in Christian marriages. Cheating in marriage is not just when one party colours outside the lines – it is that – but it is also when one partner gives to the other less than they desire in the bedroom. That leads me to my third principle:

3. All your sexual passion, interest and expression should be channelled into the marriage relationship.

Paul wants to get all Corinthian Christian sexuality back into the marriage bed and to realize that goal, two things IN GENERAL need to happen. Men need to stop colouring outside the lines and women need to be more generous with their bodies. Now again, let me summon a credible witness to that interpretation. After referencing the findings of Jennifer Glancy, author of *Slavery In Early Christianity* with respect to the attitude of Roman men towards sex with household slaves, New Testament scholars Ciampa and Rosner say that:

Paul’s teaching in vv. 2-5 may be based in part on a sense that such wives might need some apostolic encouragement to be prepared for that potentially unexpected (and potentially unwanted) increased sexual attention from their husbands.⁶

When you become Christians, Paul says, all your sex needs to happen in the marriage bed. Husbands you need to hear that and stop having sex with your servants, wives you need to hear that and you need to prepare yourselves for increased attention.

⁶Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary. Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 276.

Now let me say something here that needs to be said far more often than it gets said. This principle certainly excludes pornography and self-gratification. It is very common in a Christian marriage for the frequency of sex to be determined by the woman's appetite for it. Women enjoy sex but often don't feel a need for it the same way that a man does. Therefore a lot of couples settle into a pattern whereby the woman's lesser appetite determines the frequency of marital intercourse. The husband deals with his excess passions via pornography and self-gratification. Surprisingly, John Calvin has some excellent pastoral counsel that applies to this very modern day concern. Defending the Apostle Paul for this seemingly immodest teaching, Calvin says:

Profane persons might think that Paul does not act with sufficient modesty in discoursing in this manner as to the intercourse of a husband with his wife; or at least that it was unbecoming the dignity of an Apostle. If, however, we consider the reasons that influenced him, we shall find that he was under the necessity of speaking of these things.... he knew how prone every one is to self-love, and devoted to his own gratification. From this it comes, that a husband, having had his desire gratified, treats his wife not merely with neglect, but even with disdain; and there are few that do not sometimes feel this disdain of their wives creep in upon them. It is for these reasons that he treats so carefully of the mutual obligations of the married life.⁷

Calvin was not speaking specifically about pornography, rather he was speaking generally about any occasion where a man sexually gratifies himself apart from his wife and he says that regular, generous sexual intercourse between husband and wife is the solution to that temptation. He says further that if you give into that temptation – the temptation to self gratify apart from your spouse – you will in turn come to despise your spouse and to treat her with contempt. That is just about the wisest pastoral counsel I have ever read. I've been talking to Christians about their marriage troubles for 20 years and I can tell you that every man who permits himself to be sexually gratified apart from his wife has come by degrees to despise his wife and to rob her of the tenderness that is her due. You turn yourself into a stone through self gratification. It is a sin against yourself and your spouse.

Lastly, let us turn now to what Paul says about celibacy.

Setting The Record Straight With Respect To Celibacy

Let's read verses 6-9:

⁶Now as a concession, not a command, I say this. ⁷I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own gift

⁷John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries (Complete)*, trans. John King, Accordance electronic ed. (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1847), n.p.

from God, one of one kind and one of another.

⁸To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single as I am. ⁹But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion. (1 Corinthians 7:6–9 ESV)

Now the first thing we need to do is remember the question. The question was, is it good for a man not to touch a woman? So what Paul is saying here is the exception to the general rule. The general rule he gave in verses 1-5. The general rule is get married have sex, be faithful and generous to your spouse. The exception is given as a concession not a command. There may be some among you who are called to singleness, that too can be a very good thing. But each has his own gift from God. Live joyfully with the gift that God gives you. That's what Paul says here and from this passage we note 3 fairly obvious and straight-forward principles.

Principles:

1. Both marriage and celibacy can be good

They are both gifts from God. There is a gift of celibacy. Marriage is the normal gift that God gives to men and women but celibacy too – or rather the ability to be joyfully celibate and single – is a gift that God gives and it like all gifts is given to edify the church. Let's be very clear, single Christians are a gift to the church. Single Christians are very often the work-horses of Christianity. You can do far more good as a single person for the church than you can as a married person with kids. You can't dispute that – I have watched that principle at work in the life of my wife. When we had few kids my wife was extraordinarily involved with the church. She was involved in Children's Ministry, she sung in the worship team, she mentored young women, she was all over the place. With each child we have had, she has taken a step back. She still serves twice a month in CM, she serves once a month on the worship team at RCC but she is not as involved as when we had 1 kid. That is just life. Now, she is not therefore less useful to God – remember last week we talked about God's concern for holy seed – she is VERY valuable to God. Mothering is ENORMOUSLY important and central with respect to the glory of God and with respect to the Great Commission. Be fruitful and multiply is still a huge part of the game plan. The pagans aren't breeding anymore so, just like the Bible says, the meek will inherit the earth. She is in on that. However, with respect to the ministries of the church – there is no way she could match the contribution of a single person. Single people can be SINGULAR in their focus. They don't have homework to help with, they don't have swimming lessons to go or

soccer practice to drive to. They don't have needy husbands they have to attend to or as Paul will say in verse 33, they don't have wives to be anxious for. The single person thinks only about how to please the Lord. That can be a REALLY good thing in the church.

2. You have to have the gift to embrace the lifestyle

Calvin again is fantastic on this, he says:

Guard, accordingly, against rashly devoting what is not in your own power, and what you will not obtain as a gift, **if forgetful of your calling you aspire beyond your limits.**⁸

Some people he says, enflamed with ambition to please the Lord attempt something they are not gifted for. They aspire beyond their limits. Calvin is saying if you don't actually have the gift of celibacy you are going to fall flat on your face and make a mess. Know your limit and play within it.

That leads to the final principle:

3. You will know very quickly whether you have the gift or not

People have often asked me over the years how a person can know whether they have the gift of celibacy or not. The answer is really easy to find. You will find it in yourself; Paul says:

But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion. (1 Corinthians 7:9 ESV)

If you can't focus on serving the Lord in your singleness because you are distracted by loneliness or lust, then you obviously don't have the gift of celibacy and you should marry. You can pray and ask for the gift, but if it isn't given, then set yourself on marriage before you fall prey to sexual temptation. It is better to marry than to burn.

Conclusion:

⁸John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries (Complete)*, trans. John King, Accordance electronic ed. (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1847), n.p.

When I read passages like the one we've read this morning I become aware that we, like the Corinthians, have foolishly adopted an awful lot of worldly values and opinions and practices with respect to sexuality and marriage. Our particular errors may not be exactly the same as the errors of these Corinthians, but like them, there is way too much world in our church. We have built marriages on the counsel of Dr. Sue, Dr. Phil and goddess Oprah. Our view of sex is more like that of Maxim and Kim Kardassian than it is of Apostle Paul. Our response today, men and women, married and single, should be that of repentance, confession and prayer. O Lord, teach us again how to glorify God in our bodies. This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.