

WHAT ABOUT MARRIAGE?

1 Corinthians 7:1-9

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In the early chapters of 1 Corinthians Paul has addressed a number of issues concerning the church: divisions in the church, a sexually immoral relationship, Christians suing other Christians in public courts, and the abuse of Christian liberty. In chapter 7, Paul takes up matters that the church had written to him in a previous letter, “**Now concerning the things which you wrote.**” We know that Paul had corresponded with the church in an earlier letter (5:9) and that they had replied to that letter (16:17). It is in response to some of the things in that previous letter that Paul addresses in the remainder of this letter: marriage and singleness (7:1-40); meat sacrificed to idols (8:1-11:1); the gifts of the Spirit (12:1-14:40); offerings (16:1-4); and the location of Apollos (16:12). Each of these sections begins with the Greek phrase *peri de*, “now concerning.” We begin this morning to look at the first of these issues, the question about marriage and singleness.

Paul’s preceding discussion of sexual immorality leads him to focus on the questions the Corinthians had about marriage. Who should marry? Who should remain single? What is the proper conduct of marriage partners? How should husbands and wives relate to each other? When these relations break down, is divorce an option? The Corinthians had no role models in their society in the area of marriage, particularly faithfulness in marriage. So they ask Paul to be their marriage counselor, to give his advice on marital issues in the church. What we learn from our text this morning is that *marriage, and the intimacy that comes with it, serves as a safeguard against sexual immorality.*

I. A Reason for Marriage (7:1-2)

When we see blatant immorality around us, we are right in calling attention to it and rebuking it. We are commanded to do so in Scripture. But we must be careful that we do not exceed what is written. This often happens when someone sees an action in the Christian life that they know is sinful and in an effort to correct it “swings the pendulum” too far in the other direction. One of Satan’s greatest ploys is to turn license into legalism. This had occurred in the church at Corinth. Last week (6:12-20) we saw that some in Corinth abused the liberty they had by God’s grace by justifying their actions with prostitutes. Here, Paul deals with those who had gone to the other extreme. They claimed, “**It is good for a man not to touch a woman.**” Or, as the ESV more accurately translates it, “**It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.**” Notice this was their claim, not Paul’s. Here we see Paul’s response.

1. What Paul did not mean (v. 1)

Some are of the view that these words state Paul’s low view of marriage and his consequent attempt to hold celibacy as the higher Christian standard. However, there are many hurdles to overcome to prove that Paul believed it was best, and I emphasize best, not to marry.

First, as we have seen, the Corinthian’s are the ones who expressed this belief. Paul is responding to their over zealous practice of celibacy in response to the actions of those that had justified their actions with prostitutes. As we will see in a moment, while Paul *prefers* celibacy, it is the exception, not the rule.

Second, as we will see in v. 2, he declares just the opposite when he says that man and woman should unite in marriage and have sexual relations within that union.

Third, in v. 26 Paul shows that his advice on this subject is given in light of “the present distress,” in reference to the peculiar circumstances that existed at Corinth. Paul is dealing with what is “not good” or not beneficial at that time.

Fourth, in 1 Timothy 4:3 Paul links “*men* who forbid marriage” with apostates, those who fall away from the faith and reject Christ. If Paul’s position was one of forbidding marriage, then he is identifying himself with those who he predicted would apostatize the faith.

Fifth, if Paul were outright denying marriage, he would be contradicting God’s own word and institution of marriage, “It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him” (Gen. 2:18). God then institutes marriage in Genesis 2:24, “For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh.” God said it was not good for man to be alone. Paul is not saying it is good for man or woman to be alone. This would be to pit Paul’s inspired word against God’s inspired Word, the inerrant Word against the inerrant Word.

Sixth, this same Paul, in Ephesians 5, which I read earlier, speaks of marriage in the highest of terms by comparing it to Christ’s love for His bride, the Church. The selfless, sacrificial love that Christ exhibited for His Church is the supreme example of the love a husband is to have for his wife. If Paul had a low view of marriage he would never have used this illustration because it would have devalued the love of Christ.

These things demonstrate that Paul was not holding up celibacy as a moral rule over and against the morality of marriage. As we will see, Paul did think celibacy was good, but it was not a more spiritual state than marriage nor was it more acceptable to God. Paul is simply responding to those that had gone to an extreme in their view regarding sexual relations between man and woman.

2. What Paul did mean (v. 2)

To distance himself from the statement, “**It is good for a man not to touch a woman,**” Paul raised an issue that should have put the matter to rest. In contrast to the outright denial of sexual relations, Paul insisted, “**each man is to have his own wife, and each woman is to have her own husband.**” The verb “**have**” has a sexual context. Here, Paul is not suggesting that man should initiate marriage, but should continue “**to have**” his wife sexually within the marriage bond that already existed, and vice versa. “**To have**” is an imperative, a command, not a suggestion. As one writer put it, “It is best to understand Paul not as exhorting unmarried people to marry, but rather married people to carry on continuing sexual relationships with one another” [Richard Pratt, *1 Corinthians*, 207]. It is evident from this verse that these that promoted celibacy at Corinth did so even within the confines of the marriage union. Their way of overcoming sexual immorality was to abstain from sex, period! However, celibacy in a marriage is wrong. Sexual relations within the marriage union is not only acceptable, but is commanded. “**Each man is to have his own wife, and each woman is to have her own husband.**”

Paul’s concern in this matter was not simply theoretical, but pastoral. His focus was on these “**immoralities**” (plural) that were rampant in their society. His concern was that they remain faithful to God’s Word and not fall short of, nor go beyond, what was written. It is just because of these immoralities that a husband should have sexual relations with his wife and not abstain. As Roger Ellsworth put it, “Marriage was not part of the immorality problem; it was the

solution! It is the God-given safeguard against sexual immorality in that it gives a channel for sexual release” [*Strengthening God’s Church*, 117].

While this is true, we must offer a word of caution here. Paul is not offering the ground of marriage here, as if it were simply a remedy for sin. Paul is not saying that marriage is the solution to sexual temptation. He is giving *a* reason for marriage, not *the* reason. As Calvin put it, “The question is not as to the reasons for which marriage has been instituted, but as to the persons for whom it is necessary” [*1 Corinthians*, 225]. Paul is not saying that the only reason to get married is to avoid sexual immorality, nor is he saying that the sole purpose of physical intimacy in the marriage is to overcome sexual temptation. He is simply dealing with a particular question, the question of celibacy, in light of an actual situation that was occurring at Corinth. Incidentally, while it is not Paul’s primary concern here, he does define biblical marriage as between one man and one woman. The marriage relationship is to be monogamous.

Why was this so important to Paul? Again, I think we see Paul’s *high* view of marriage here and not a *low* view at all. Paul knew that the upholding of marriage as God instituted it is one of the best safeguards (to borrow from Ellsworth) of morality in society. As John Piper said, “Marriage is a dam against the flood of fornication and adultery” [<http://www.desiringgod.org/library/sermons/84/120984.html>]. This is why it is vitally important for Christians to demonstrate the goodness of marriage in our culture that is so confused about marriage, especially as it relates to sexual relations within the marriage union. Christians must demonstrate the unity and wholeness of the marriage bond. They must be engaged in reflecting the love of Christ in their marriage. Christians must look for opportunities to dialogue when they hear a man talk of his wife as if she is simply some object or when they hear of a woman who talks negatively of their husband. In other words, believers must reflect the gospel and the love of Christ in their marriage. That is Paul’s point in Ephesians 5. This cannot happen if the husband and wife are not attending to their marriage in a proper way, which leads us to the second part of this text.

II. Some Obligations in Marriage (7:3-5)

As we have noted, it is obvious from Paul’s treatment here that there were some at Corinth that had taken vows of celibacy within the marriage union. Further, they thought that they were being spiritual in doing so. However, Paul reminds them that not only were they not more spiritual, but probably less so. We must remember the context of this entire episode. Sexual immorality was entrenched in Corinth, both inside and outside of the church. Some continued to live as if they were at liberty to seek sexual gratification outside of marriage; others totally refrained from any physical contact, even within marriage. Paul reminds them of how the proper conjugation of marriage helps in the area of sexual immorality and temptation.

1. Fulfillment of duty (v. 3)

Paul wrote, “**The husband must fulfill his duty to his wife, and likewise also the wife to her husband.**” The words “**fulfill**” and “**duty**” denote the payment of a debt that each one owes to the other [Kistemaker, *1 Corinthians*, 212]. The husband and wife are to fulfill their conjugal duties toward each other. This is not simply a recommendation for a healthy marriage, but a command. As John MacArthur rightly points out,

God holds all marriage to be sacred and He holds sexual relations between husband and wife not only to be sacred but proper and obligatory. Paul makes it clear that physical

relations within marriage are not simply a privilege and a pleasure but a responsibility. Husband and wives have a **duty** to give sexual satisfaction to each other. [1 *Corinthians*, 157]

The importance of this as it relates to overcoming sexual immorality and temptation should be obvious. Marriage protects against these temptations when it functions properly. The husband and wife have the “**duty**” to offer sexual relations to each other. When they do so unselfishly and joyfully, then the temptation of sexual immorality is weakened. As John Piper said, “Husbands and wives should satisfy each other sexually, so that their eyes and hearts do not roam elsewhere” [<http://www.desiringgod.org/library/sermons/84/120984.html>].

This is what Paul tries to demonstrate to these at Corinth. For them to withhold these God-given relations in marriage was to defeat one of the purposes for marriage. To continue in abstinence could have a disastrous outcome. The very thing they are trying to avoid by abstaining could happen because they were abstaining. But even if it did not backfire in one marriage, it could happen in another marriage if celibacy were held up as law. So Paul’s first obligation for marriage is for the husband and wife to fulfill their duty in this area.

2. Dedication to equality (v. 4)

But Paul does not leave it there. He seems to anticipate how this “**duty**” might be misconstrued, so he adds, “**The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; and likewise also the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does.**” Unfortunately, these words have been used to excuse physical, verbal, and sexual abuse of husbands against their wives. These words have also led wives to a wrong understanding of submission to their husbands in sexual relations that have caused great physical and emotional harm. However, these views abuse and misunderstand this verse.

Paul’s teaching here is twofold. First, since in the relationship of marriage one does not have authority over his/her body but their spouse does, then they have no authority to use it as they please sexually. This means physically with another person or while alone. Sexual temptation leading to sinful immorality often begins when one is alone in front of the television or alone in front of a computer screen. May we be reminded of Jesus’ teaching, “You have heard that it was said, ‘YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY’; but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart (Matthew 5:27-28).

Second, undergirding this idea of authority is the idea of equality. There is a respect, an honor that should be given to one another in the area of sexuality. Paul teaches elsewhere that the husband is the head of the wife and that the wife is to submit to him (Eph. 5:22-33). However, in respect to sexuality, there is total equality. They submit to one another and sexual relations are consensual and agreed upon mutually. Neither husbands nor wives have license to force their sexual desires on their spouse. To do so would put a hole in the dam (borrowing from Piper). It would go against the purpose of protecting from sexual temptations outside of marriage.

3. Obtaining of consent (v. 5)

Paul clarifies this argument, “**Stop depriving one another, except by agreement for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer, and come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.**” Again, Paul’s concern was the danger inherent in abstinence within marriage. So he commands them, “**Stop depriving one**

another.” With one exception: so that you might truly become more spiritual. These were withholding for the wrong reason and thought that they were more spiritual. Paul has destroyed that thought but does not discount the thought that it might be of value to abstain at times when there is mutual agreement. Throughout the Old Testament, times of special religious devotion, such as intense prayer and fasting, included sexual abstinence. Paul allows for these special times as long as both are in agreement. It should be noted that, upon agreeing to abstain for the purpose of prayer, the two do so together. This is not a situation where one partner, even with the consent of the other, devotes him or herself to prayer. They do so together. And then it should only be for a brief time so that Satan is not able to gain a foothold and feed on their sexual deprivation. The longer couples abstain from sex, the greater the risk that one or the other partner will lose self-control and fall into sexual immorality with someone else. So we see that both the action of sexual intimacy and the withholding of sexual intimacy are to be by mutual consent.

There are two warnings to be heeded here. First, we do not know the strength of our desires, and we certainly do not know Satan’s power to use these desires against us. We must constantly guard our hearts and minds in this area, and, if you are married, God has given you a spouse to help you in this area. We must not leave ourselves at Satan’s mercy to devour us. Husband, your wife is not simply an object for your sexual gratification. You have no biblical warrant for making her “submit” to you sexually. That is nothing more than intimidation. Wife, withholding sexual relations from your husband is no way to show him who is boss. That is manipulation. Further, “submitting to him” unnecessarily causes him to remain spiritually immature in this area. When these relations are used as God has given them to be used, there is great joy in marriage and the temptation of sexual immorality is weakened. Conversely, when abused, great harm comes to the marriage relationship and the temptation of sexual immorality can be strengthened.

The second warning to be heeded is that sex is not the grounds for marriage. Those who marry for the lust of pleasure tend to fall with a great fall. While marriage serves as the conduit that God has provided for sexual relations and as a safeguard against sexual immorality, these are not reasons in and of themselves for marriage. While God designed marriage for pleasure, it was also designed for procreation and partnership. These things must be taken into account when discussing marriage.

III. Married or Single? (7:6-9)

After giving one of the great purposes for marriage, Paul gives advice on whether one should marry or remain single as he. Verse 6 is a qualifier, **“But this I say by way of concession, not of command.”** **“Concession”** here means “permission” or “allowable” and refers back to all that he has said regarding marriage. Paul is saying that he is not giving an apostolic command that all believers should be married or that they should remain single. The believer has permission to go either way. Paul is simply giving his advice on these things. While he had the ability to live faithfully as a single person, he does not impose his abstinence on others who lacked this ability. The believer is free to marry or no to marry. It really is that simple. There is no need to make this verse more difficult than it really is. As John MacArthur put it,

I think Paul was saying that he was *aware* of the goodness of being single and celibate, yet also aware of the privileges and responsibilities of marriage. His comments were **not** meant as a **command** for every believer to be married. Marriage was instituted by

God and is the norm for man-woman relationships, and it is a great blessing to mankind. But it is not required for believers of anyone else. His point was: if you are single that is good, and if you are married or get married, stay married and retain normal marital relations, for that is of God. Spirituality is not determined by marital status. [*I Corinthians*, 159]

Again, Paul is trying to swing the pendulum back to the middle in dealing with these that had over reacted to sexual immorality and had made vows of celibacy for the wrong reason. He wanted the Corinthians to have a balanced approach to overcoming sexual immorality. Marriage or singleness was no test of their spirituality and they were at liberty to marry or no to marry.

Having said this, Paul shows his preference, **“Yet I wish that all men were even as I myself am,”** that is, unmarried. We do not know if Paul had been married previous to this or not. Given Paul’s background in Judaism and training as a rabbi it is more than likely that he had been married before. Jewish men were required to marry for the purpose of procreating (Mishnah, *Yeb.* 6:6) and they were frowned upon if they had not married by the age of twenty (Talmud, *Kidd.* 29b). Many think that Paul’s wife, remaining true to Judaism, probably left him when he became a Christian. Regardless of his former state of marriage, he was unmarried at this time and his desire was that they could remain unmarried as well, not simply as a way to overcome sexual immorality, but because of the freedoms associated with serving the Lord, as we will see in a few weeks. This was Paul’s personal feeling, not something that was decisive. There were some factors to consider in remaining single.

First, Paul says one must have the gift of celibacy, **“However, each man has his own gift from God, one in this manner, and another in that.”** In other words, God blesses one person with the call to be single, and another he calls to marriage. Again, Paul did not think that celibacy was a greater gift than marriage. He simply understood that singleness is a calling, and marriage is a calling. He did not succumb to the Jewish teaching that one was obligated to marry. One must prayerfully consider God’s calling and giftedness.

Second, one must have self-control, “But I say to the unmarried and to widows that it is good for them if they remain even as I. But if they do not have self-control, let them marry.” This is known as continency, the ability to restrain ourselves. This speaks for itself. If a person cannot control their sexual desires, then they should marry. Again, this is not the only reason to marry nor is it the grounds of marriage. If one does not have self-control, it is better to marry, **“for it is better to marry than to burn with passion.”** There is debate over what **“to burn”** means here. The words **“with passion”** are not in the original and are added for clarification. Some think that Paul here refers to burning in Gehenna, the judgment awaiting those who are given to a life of sexual immorality. But the more likely thought is that it is better to marry than to be driven by your lusts. To live with constant pent-up passion would be counter productive in overcoming sexual temptation. So Paul says it is better to marry than to be so consumed with inward desires and driven by these passions that nothing else matters.

Conclusion

Marriage and singleness are both gifts from God. One must seek the Lord in this area. It is easy to get married for all the wrong reasons. It is also easy to remain single for all the wrong reasons.

If you are married, do you recognize your responsibilities in marriage, particularly in the area of sexual intimacy? Do you recognize the wonderful safeguard that God has provided to protect us from sexual immorality?