**Lesson Six: Sex, Singleness and Marriage – Chapter 7**

# Sex and Marriage

Background: Paul reacts to one of the latest teachings creeping into the church as a result of Greek philosophy. Some members taught that all contact with the flesh was sinful, thus, sexual intercourse between Christians who were married was forbidden, since it was an act of the flesh. Paul thus reminded the church of the principle of mutual sexual responsibility in marriage (vs. 3-6). Paul advocated the following three principles:

Principles:

1. Sexual intercourse within the context of marriage is biblical and sanctioned by God as normal (vs. 2-3)
2. Each member of a marriage ought to express their ultimate affection for their spouse despite the conditions that might impede intimacy. Thus, the husband should never withhold sexual affection from his wife because of her seeming inability to be submissive or to remain attractive. The wife on the other hand should never withhold sexual affection from her husband because of his seeming inability to understand her and support her. The Christian husband or wife has a duty to be affectionate to their spouse at all times (v. 4).
3. Sexual intimacy should not be used as a bargaining tool or as a system of reward or punishment by either spouse. Any decision to withhold sexual intercourse in the context of marriage should be by mutual consent and should be temporary. (v.5).

Question for Discussion:

1. Does the Christian spouse have the right to remain sexually faithful to their partner even under extenuating circumstances, such as, physical and emotional abusive and sexual unfaithfulness?

**Singleness:**

1. The Benefits of Singleness
   * More attention can be given to God and his church unlike the married individual whose attention is divided between a spouse and the church, (vs. 32-35).
   * A person is not bound in marriage to one person for eternity unless death intervenes (v. 39)
2. The Challenges of Singleness
   * The possibility of ‘burning’ or being unable to control sexual passion, (v. 9)
   * Appreciating and utilizing the gift of singleness (vs. 32, 37 & 40)
   * Likely possibility of developing low self-esteem and coping with loneliness
   * Possibility of developing identity issues along with that of life direction in regards to fulfilling God’s calling.

Principles:

* + Singleness is a gift from God and is not a curse or a stigma. While it has its challenges it can be used graciously for the advancement of the kingdom of God.
  + The Christian Church ought to exalt single persons who are actively involved in the ministry of the church as exemplars. They are to be prayed for, encouraged and supported institutionally, financially and emotionally.
  + Singleness is not superior or inferior to marriage. Both are to be accepted graciously and utilized for the advancement of the kingdom of God.
  + Christians are to learn to be contended in whatever situation that they find themselves, whether single or married. At each stage they are important instruments of God.

Questions for Discussion:

* + Is it right for members of the Christian Church to look down upon and tease Christian singles?
  + Is it right for Christian singles to seek to get married simply because they are unable to control their sexual urges or they are very lonely?
  + Are Christian couples called to minister to their families? Is marriage then an occasion for ministry?

***For the married: maintain sexual relations (7:1–7)***

The key to understanding this opening section of the chapter lies in the first two verses. In the Corinthian slogan, the expression, “to *touch* a woman” (7:1) is a common euphemism meaning “to have sexual intercourse with a woman.” This expression is never used to mean “to marry,” as the niv misleadingly translates it. Likewise, the language in verse 2, “Let each man *have* his own wife and let each woman *have* her own husband” does not mean that those who are unmarried should find spouses; that in fact is the exact opposite of the advice that Paul gives to the unmarried in this chapter (vv. 8, 27, 38)! Instead, the verb “to have” in this context means—just as it can also in English—to enjoy sexual possession of another person. (For example, this is the same Greek verb used in 5:1: literally, “for a man *to have* his father’s wife.”) What, then, does verse 2 mean? The text makes sense only when we recognize that Paul is speaking here not to the unmarried, but to the already married. He is telling married couples that they ought to continue to have sexual relations with one another. This interpretation is decisively confirmed when we read verses 3–4: Paul reiterates the point in unmistakable terms, insisting that each partner possesses the body of the other.

The logic of these opening verses, then, is as follows. It is all very well in principle to abstain from sexual intercourse, as the Corinthians have suggested, but Paul insists that couples who are already married should not try to renounce their sex life, because of the danger that one of the partners might be tempted outside the marriage into fornication (v. 2).

All this may seem rather puzzling to the modern reader. Is this advice really necessary? Do married couples need to be told to keep having sexual intercourse? Do the Corinthians need to write a letter to Paul to clarify this issue? The answer to these questions, in fact, is yes. Some of the Corinthians may very well have concluded that sexuality was part of a “fleshly” unspiritual existence and that persons in Christ ought to renounce such base physical pleasures in order to “be holy in body and spirit” (cf. 7:34).

This sort of asceticism was “in the air” in ancient Mediterranean culture. The Stoic and Cynic philosophical schools—whose thought, as we have seen, significantly influenced the Corinthians—debated whether a philosopher should marry or whether the unmarried state was more conducive to the pursuit of wisdom. In Greek popular religion, virginity and sexual purity were often associated with those set aside for the service of the gods, particularly for women who were prophets—the priestess of the oracle at Delphi, for example. In Paul’s day, even Judaism, which classically had celebrated procreation as the duty of everyone, developed ascetic movements such as the Essenes and the Therapeutae about whom Philo of Alexandria wrote glowingly. Difficult as it may be for many at the end of the twentieth century to appreciate, sexual abstinence was widely viewed as a means to personal wholeness and religious power.

At the same time, there were ascetic impulses afoot within early Christianity itself. How were the Corinthians to interpret the baptismal proclamation, which they probably would have learned from Paul, that in Christ “there is no longer male and female” (Gal. 3:28)? If tradition about the teaching of Jesus were circulating in their church, would they have heard that Jesus had said, “Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage; but those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage … they are like angels” (Luke 20:34–35, 36)? And what conclusion were they to draw from the fact that Paul himself—their founding apostle—had been conspicuously unmarried (cf. 1 Cor. 7:8; 9:5)? We must remember that the Corinthians had no past Christian tradition to look to for guidelines about how to interpret such things; they were inventing the Christian life as they went, trying to work out the implications of the gospel for refashioning their lives.

We know from other early Christian writings that some groups within the church did seek to practice radical forms of asceticism. In Colossians 2:20–23 we find Paul opposing false teachers who say “Do not handle [the same verb translated as *touch* in 1 Cor. 7:1], do not taste, do not touch.” Such rules, he insists, “have indeed an appearance of wisdom (*sophia*) in promoting self-imposed piety, humility, and severe treatment of the body, but they are of no value in checking self-indulgence.” Similarly, 1 Timothy 4:3 polemicizes against those who “forbid marriage and demand abstinence from foods.”

Under these circumstances, and under the influence of cultural forces that associated holiness and wisdom with celibacy, it is hardly surprising that some of the Corinthians might have decided that the ordinary married life was incompatible with their new spiritual identity in Christ. This is the situation that seems to lie behind 1 Corinthians 7. Some of the members of the Corinthian church had decided that celibacy was necessary; even some of those who were married were attempting to renounce sex. Some interpreters of 1 Corinthians have suggested that sexual abstinence might have been especially appealing to some of the women in the community, who were functioning as prophets in the church and finding a new sphere of power and freedom outside the traditional restraints of domestic life. Abstinence from sexual intercourse also would give women freedom from pregnancy and the responsibilities of caring for children. At the same time, however, the formulation of the Corinthian slogan (v. 1b: “It is well for *a man* not to touch a woman”) suggests that it was the *men* in the community who were urging the renunciation of sexual relations. Probably the call to asceticism found a sympathetic hearing among some members of both sexes in the Corinthian church.

In any case, this development would have proven difficult for some members of the church who suddenly found themselves deprived of sexual companionship. They found their spouses withdrawing from the physical relationship or perhaps even separating from the marriage altogether (cf. 7:10–11) in the interests of holiness. Perhaps this is part of the reason that some of the Corinthian Christians were going to prostitutes (6:15–16).

Against this background, Paul’s response to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 7:1–7 comes with clarity and force: No, he says, those who are married must not declare a moratorium on sexual relations! “The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband” (v. 3). The first reason for this was already suggested in verse 2: “because of cases of sexual immorality.” The spouse who “deprives” his or her partner of sexual intimacy may be preparing the conditions for Satan to tempt the partner into *porneia* because of the difficulty of self-control (cf. v. 5). And, as Paul has already explained at length, *porneia* is damaging to the community of faith as a whole.

But Paul now goes on in verse 4 to offer a second reason more profoundly related to the character of marriage itself: “For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does.” This was a commonplace view in the ancient world. Paul’s next sentence, however, must have struck many first-century hearers as extraordinary: “likewise, the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does.” Here Paul articulates a view of marriage that stands as a challenge to views ancient and modern alike. The marriage partners are neither placed in a hierarchical relation with one over the other nor set apart as autonomous units each doing what he or she pleases. Instead, the relationship of marriage is one of *mutual submission*, each partner having authority over the other. Regrettably, Paul does not pause to develop the wider implications of this remarkable idea. His immediate concern is focused on the problem at Corinth: in marriage, he insists, there is to be no unilateral withdrawal—nor even a mutually negotiated withdrawal!—from regular sexual intercourse.

In verse 5, however, he does offer one concession to the Corinthians’ desire to seek special spiritual disciplines. Temporary short-term abstinence is permissible *if* it is undertaken “by agreement” (the Greek *ek symphōnou* means literally “with a common voice”—notice the etymological root of the English word “symphony”) of husband and wife together. The purpose of such an arrangement is to allow the partners to devote themselves to prayer, but Paul is insistent that they must come together again after the fixed time, in order to avoid the danger of temptation. This allowance for temporary abstinence is the “concession” to which Paul refers in verse 6, though he makes it clear that he is not at all commanding such a practice.

In light of these observations, we can see how disastrously misinterpreted this passage has been by much of the Corinthian tradition. The time-honored reading of this text sees Paul as grudgingly permitting marriage itself as a distasteful concession to the lusts of the flesh. In fact, however, it is some of the Corinthians who are seeking to renounce marriage and sexual intercourse, and it is Paul who insists in a robustly realistic way that sexual relations within marriage are normal and necessary.

To be sure, Paul himself is unmarried and—by his own account—in control of his own sexual impulses, so that he does not need the physical satisfaction of marriage. Even though he says in verse 7 that he wants everyone to be “as I myself am,” he simultaneously recognizes that different people have different gifts and that not everyone is called by God to celibacy. This statement may imply that marriage itself is also a gift (*charisma*) from God, though Paul does not say so explicitly.

In light of these exegetical observations, we can clarify the meaning of the passage by constructing a paraphrase, filling in some of the silent assumptions and gaps in the conversation. The words in italics are supplied as explanatory expansions to show how Paul’s advice seeks to address the particular issues raised by the Corinthians.

(1) Now I will respond to the matters about which you wrote. *You propose that, for the sake of holiness and purity, married couples should abstain from sexual intercourse. As you say*, “It is a fine thing for a man not to touch a woman.” (2) But—*since that is unrealistic*—let each husband have sexual intercourse with his own wife, and let each wife have sexual intercourse with her own husband. (3) *Marriage creates a mutual obligation for a couple to satisfy one another’s needs; therefore*, let the husband give the wife what he owes her, and likewise let the wife give what she owes to her husband. (4) For the wife does not rule her own body; the husband does. Likewise, the husband does not rule his own body; the wife does. (5) Do not deprive one another, unless you decide—in harmony with one another—to abstain from intercourse for a time so that *both of* you can devote yourselves to prayer. But (*when the time is up*) come together again, so that Satan will not be able to tempt you. (6) I am not commanding this *practice of temporary abstinence*; rather, I am saying this as a concession *to your proposal [see v. 1, above]*. (7) I wish that everyone could be *in control of sexual desire* like me. *Obviously, however, that is not the case*. But each person has his or her own gift (*charisma*) from God: *if not celibacy, then something else*, one in one way and another in some other way.

When the passage is read in this way, the true emphases of Paul’s pastoral advice are brought more clearly into view.

One question must be raised about this historical reconstruction, however: How is this account of the situation related to the problems addressed in chapters 5 and 6, where the Corinthians’ problem seems to be an excess of sexual free expression rather than a withdrawal into asceticism? Two mutually reinforcing answers may be given.

First, we know already from the letter that the Corinthian community was divided into factions (1:10–17; 3:1–4). If the debate over abstention from certain foods was a cause of division in the community, as we learn in chapters 8–10 it was, it is not unreasonable to suppose that differences over sexual practices might also have been among the causes of division, though Paul says nothing in 1 Corinthians 7 to indicate this explicitly. This might well explain, however, why the Corinthians had raised this issue prominently in their letter. Paul’s teaching in chapters 5–7 would, then, address different factions sequentially: first those who believe themselves free to do whatever they want with their bodies, then those who believe that their bodies should be kept from all sexual contact. In response to both groups, Paul offers a single consistent position: celibacy is good, sex within marriage is good, and *porneia* is a disaster for the community. By affirming the rightness and necessity of sexual love in marriage—and only there—Paul rejects the extreme positions on both sides.

Second, it is a sad truth of human nature that hyperspirituality can often lead, paradoxically, to a backlash of fleshly indulgence. This truth is impressed upon us each time we see another headline about a television evangelist or church leader whose sexual misadventures have been exposed to the light—and all of us have seen more than enough such headlines in recent years to make us grieve deeply. Paul’s directives in 1 Corinthians 7:1–7 take the measure of this sober reality. There is an inner spiritual connection between these apparently antithetical claims and behaviors at Corinth. Those who say “I am free to do anything” and those who say “I must abstain from everything” are equally setting themselves outside their God-given creaturely limitations. The attempt to escape our finitude—whether one way or the other—is bound to fail and send us crashing down. That is why Paul gives simple earthy counsel; husbands and wives should cling together and fulfill one another’s needs.

[[1]](#footnote-1)

1. Hays, R. B. 1997. *First Corinthians*. Interpretation, a Bible commentary for teaching and preaching . John Knox Press: Louisville, Ky. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)