

Choices about Marriage and Singleness

1 Corinthians 7

Turn to 1 Corinthians 7 please. There are all kinds of views in our society about marriage and sexuality, and there are all kinds of views about marriage and sexuality also in the church. I feel quite a bit of urgency to read the Bible as carefully as I can about these things.

What is the Bible actually saying and not saying? We can't just preach "traditional family values," as if our tradition had everything right. It did not. What we want is biblical values.

So I say all these things to you first, but this is not the last place I say them. That's why we're covering 1 Cor 7 today, choices about sexuality for married and single followers of Christ.

The Problem in the Corinthian Church: it's best for men and women not to touch each other.

V. 1 *Now for the matters you wrote about: "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman."*

The Corinthian church had written a letter to Paul about problems in their church. Some people in the church were teaching that all sexual union was wrong, sex was unspiritual, and people that really wanted to be devoted to God and follow Christ would have no such sexual intimacy.

They were also teaching this to married people, and sometimes one spouse would think that was right and the other spouse did not like it, and you can see how that would be a problem. That's the wrong teaching: is best before God not to have any sexual union, period. That's wrong, but that's what was happening there.

Marriage in 1 Corinthians 7 vs marriage in Ephesians 5. 1 Cor 7 and Eph 5 are both by Paul and both about marriage, but they read very differently from each other. But there is no contradiction. Ephesians 5 gives us the deeper purpose of marriage, husbands and wives model how Christ and his church treat each other.

But 1 Cor 7 is direct and practical instructions about sexuality, sexual desire within marriage and outside of marriage. 1 Cor 7 gives marriage a different flavour than Eph 5. I spoke last year on Eph 5, and I realized since then that it's only a part of the story; 1 Cor 7 is the other part.

1 Cor 7 has three sections: instructions to married believers (1-16), what it means to be called by the Lord (17-24), and instructions to single and engaged believers (25-39).

Keep in mind that this whole chapter is about choices, what are the best choices before God.

Many believers do not have choices about these things; this chapter is not about those situations. Jesus talks about different kinds of eunuchs in Matthew 19. We also covered that last September. Eunuchs are people who don't have a choice. 1 Cor 7 is about which choices please God.

1 Corinthians 7 is entirely and conspicuously egalitarian. Ten times, by my count, Paul writes an instruction to men or to women, and then repeats the same instruction to the other gender.

Let's read vv2-4 - (1) *But since sexual immorality is occurring, each man should have sexual relations with his own wife, and each woman with her own husband.* (2) *The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband.* (3) *The wife does not have authority over her own body but yields it to her husband. In the same way, the husband does not have authority over his own body but yields it to his wife.*

That's three times; there are about ten of those in 1 Corinthians 7. The instructions about marriage, and singleness, and sexual desires, and sexual behavior, are exactly the same to men and women. Paul goes out of his way to make this clear. Paul does not usually write like this.

He is rooting out some kind of lopsidedness about genders, don't know what it is. Other things Paul writes make people think he would NEVER sound egalitarian, for example women's head coverings teaching in 1 Cor 11. But in 1 Cor 7, men and women are treated exactly the same.

Marriage is the answer to sexual immorality. Now for the matters you wrote about: "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman."² But since sexual immorality is occurring (and it was happening in that church - 1 Cor 6:9-10; 2 Cor 12:21), each man should have sexual relations with his own wife, and each woman with her own husband.

Some Corinthians thought avoiding sexual intimacy was God's priority. No, says Paul, avoiding sexual sin is God's priority. Purity is God's emphasis, not abstinence. Marriage helps people live in sexual purity. In 1 Cor 7, that's the main thing about marriage, but don't make 1 Cor 7 the whole story. Marriage does not at all guarantee sexual purity, but it helps.

God invented sexual pleasure, keep that in mind. God is a big fan of sexual pleasure. Sexual pleasure is a picture of what it will finally be like when God and his people are together, when Christ and his bride are together.

We tend to think that if God was in favour of sexual pleasure, he would not be so concerned about sexual purity. That's human foolishness. For people who just pursue sexual pleasure, life does not go well. Their personal lives don't go well, neither does their sexual satisfaction.

Married believers may not choose to be sexually unavailable to their spouse. This is the whole point of 7:2-5. Verse 4 is a whopper: The wife does not have authority over her own body but yields it to her husband. In the same way, the husband does not have authority over his own body but yields it to his wife.

Both spouses have authority over their partner's body. How that going to work when they each want something different? Which happens often enough. V. 4 is a recipe for disaster, UNLESS both are considerate and patient with each other, both want the best for the other one.

The reason there are not a lot of special instructions to married people in the NT is that what spouses need is basic Christian character. Read the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5-7, and think only about your spouse. Read about the works of the flesh and the fruit of the Spirit, in Galatians 5, and think only of your spouse. Those are instructions to marrieds, and to the rest.

The basic standard in marriage for sexual intimacy, as you are able, be available.

Remember, 1 Cor 7 is about choices. The question of this chapter: before God what are the best choices? Marriage or not? Sexual intimacy or not? There are plenty of married and single people for whom there is no choice.

A medical doctor told me that he had many patients for whom sexual union between husband and wife had not been possible for a long time, and never would be.

There are plenty of single people in the church who would get married if there was a suitable spouse, but there is no suitable spouse. Jesus talks about this in Matthew 19 when he talks about eunuchs. Those are people who have no choice, it's been taken away from them. 1 Cor 7 is not about that, about which choice is best.

Spouses together for Life. Verses 10-11 - *To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband.... And a husband must not divorce his wife.*

In the kingdom of God, spouses staying together is a high priority. Jesus was stricter on this than the law of Moses, and he knew it. Paul is the same. It does not matter what people in the world do with marriage; in the kingdom of God, staying faithful and loyal to each other is a basic call.

I am divorced and remarried. Marilyn is my second wife. That means that my first wife and I, between the two of us, failed significantly. God has been good to me since then, but that does not make our divorce okay, or not so bad. It is bad.

I am not saying these things today to condemn anyone, but rather so that we would know how God thinks about these things, so we can make good choices. I assume that in this room there are a variety of failures to do what this chapter teaches.

Neither God nor I are trying to make anyone feel guilty. I assume that we here want to live in God's ways, so we need to know what his ways are: wives and husbands stay together for life.

Called by God to Serve God where we are (17-24) ¹⁷ *Nevertheless, each person should live as a believer in whatever situation the Lord has assigned to them, just as God has called them....*

²⁰ Each person should remain in the **calling** they were in when God **called** them.... ²³ You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of human beings. ²⁴ Brothers and sisters, each person, as responsible to God, should remain in the situation they were in when God **called** them.

This paragraph in the middle of 1 Cor 7 has nothing to do with sexuality or marriage or singleness, but it has everything to do with what kind of choices please God. The question Paul is answering is this: when we become Christians, How do devote our lives to God? What will our lives look like, if they were completely devoted to God?

First of all, when we become Christians we are **called** by God. In vv17-24, 8 verses, the NIV uses the word “called” 8 times. In Greek it is actually in there 9 times. We think that at some time in the past, we chose to believe in God. That is truly the way God offers salvation. But once we come to God, he tells us, “I chose you and I called you.” If we believe, we’re called by God.

We became Christians because God called us, and he called us to be his servants, his slaves, right where he called us. No one has to change the shape of their lives to be devoted to God. Married, single, slave, free, Jew, Gentile: obey God and serve the Lord in that place, they are all fine before God. **Every believer is in the Lord’s work fulltime, full time service to the Lord.**

When I was in high school, I thought I would end up with some kind of engineering work, like Jennifer or Fraser have. But God had another plan, instead I am a shepherd and teacher of God’s people. But in the kingdom of God, that is a lateral move. It is not a promotion. I did not move up the ladder, I just got moved to a different part of God’s building.

We ministers don’t understand this. We think we’ve become special in the kingdom, we are in full time service, and then when our ministry is taken from us, as happened to me, we’re in crisis.

I am going to read what Paul says to slaves in Ephesians 6:5-8 - *Obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ.* ⁶ *Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but [do all your work] as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart.* ⁷ *Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people,* ⁸ *because you know that the Lord will reward each one for whatever good they do, whether they are slave or free.* It is the Lord who rewards us, so let’s serve the Lord all day every day.

All of that serve the Lord in just that way. That is complete devotion to Christ. We sometime teach that to be devoted to the Lord, we need to add things to our daily lives: we need to add the private disciplines, of Bible reading and prayer etc.

And we need to add some outreach, mission trips or something. We want to show our devotion to the Lord by our private disciplines and our outreach trips. These are good things, I don’t want to discourage them. But we all need to understand that when the apostles wrote to the churches, they did not say things like that. Every believer is fulltime in the Lord’s work. It’s our calling.

To the Single and Engaged: it is most practical to stay single or engaged, and not marry. Paul has three kinds of teaching in this chapter. One, he has his own instructions, like verses 1-4. Two, Paul quotes what Jesus said when Jesus was on earth, the words of the Lord, like the verses about no divorce. And three, Paul has what he considers his advice, his opinion, not commands.

To those who are single, or engaged to be married, staying single and getting married are equally acceptable to God. No question there. Both are good, both pure, neither disappoint God at all.

But for those who are content being single, who are not distracted by their desire to be married and their sexual desires, his OPINION is that for them it's best to stay single.

Paul is remarkable straight forward about sexual desire in this chapter. Sexual desire is strong, for men and women both, and that's fine, and people on the whole are morally weak and not self-controlled, so get married.

Other people are able to serve the Lord without being distracted by sexual desires and a longing to be married. That does not necessarily mean their longings are weaker, it could as easily mean their ability to be content is stronger. Either way, Paul thinks those people should stay single. But that's just advice, if those content people want to marry then they can, no problem.

V9 But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion. V36 If anyone is worried that he might not be acting honorably toward the virgin he is engaged to, and if his passions are too strong and he feels he ought to marry, he should do as he wants. He is not sinning. They should get married.³⁷ But the man who has settled the matter in his own mind, who is under no compulsion but has control over his own will, and who has made up his mind not to marry the virgin—this man also does the right thing.

Engagement does not give believers freedom to sexual intimacy. There are some believers who say this, that once you are promised to each other, sexual intimacy is acceptable before God.

That does not work in this chapter. Paul understands the difference between being promised, and being married, both existed in the ancient world, and the solution to sexual immorality was marriage, not engagement. In the verses I just read, that it quite clear.

I have some sympathy for these couples, though. We do not discourage long engagements, and we have few boundaries preventing the engaged couple spending lots of time alone together, and the society around us generally has no problem with sexual immorality. Engaged couples are in a difficult place, I've been there. I'll come back to this. Short story: get married, now!

Some would say that ancient engagement was different, they were arranged marriages, not like ours now where it is our choice, so our engagement is as good as marriage. In Roman upper classes, marriages were often arranged, that's true, for financial or political marriages.

But most Corinthians were not in upper classes. Most of the marriages in the OT were not arranged. Jacob and Esau both chose their wives, Moses and Zipporah, Samson and his Philistine bride, Ruth and Boaz, and so on. None of those were arranged. Engagement is not marriage.

Is marriage just a piece of paper? Some say: “Marriage is just a piece of paper, why would God care about that?” Based on Scripture, one thing does not matter to God, and two things matter.

God does not care what the actual marriage ceremony looks like. The Egyptians had marriage (Joseph married there), Philistines had marriage (Samson and others), Moabites had marriage (Naomi’s sons), Romans had marriage, there were marriages in Corinth long before the gospel got there. All of these were marriage, almost every society has something called marriage.

God is fine with all of these. I was watching a Blue Jays baseball game on TV, and a section of the stands was labelled “just married,” and it was full of couples just married. Canadians have marriage, all Canadians know what that means. Details don’t matter to God, it is marriage.

Whatever that society calls “marriage,” God seems happy to work with that. BUT: God cares a lot about how his people live before they are married, AND he cares a lot about how his people live after they are married. Before married, no sexual intimacy. Once married, stay with that person for life, and sexual intimacy only there.

Whether the society takes that view of marriage or not, that’s how God’s people in that society view marriage. The Bible is consistent on these things. I’ve no interest here in condemning anyone. We get tangled up in all kinds of ways. It’s good for us to know what God says.

A rant against perfect weddings. Recently someone told me this: these were followers of the Lord living together and were not married. Went to a pastor, said, “what should we do?” He said, “I will marry you on Saturday.” That, people, is my kind of pastor. I would do that, and perhaps move it up to Thursday. I can fill out the license, we have to wait 24 hours, one of you go stay with a friend, I’ll marry you tomorrow, will cost you not a penny except a ring.

The trouble is, we want the perfect wedding, we want a Walt Disney wedding. Invitations have to be just right, and colours, and music, and clothes, and scene, and choreography, and pictures, and a beautiful dance, etc. None of these are bad, but overall it feels lopsided to me. Marilyn and I have recommended quietly to engaged couples that they just quickly elope. It will make some people grumpy, but it gets the important things done before God and saves massive hassle.

The priorities of 1 Cor 7 are sexual purity, both for singles and marrieds, and serving the Lord. Our weddings are expensive, and they put a lot of strain on the couple, especially the bride, who is regularly trashed before the wedding even begins. They take a long time to arrange, which puts sexual strain on the couple. We could help our engaged couples out on this. Rant is over.

Summary:

- 1, This all concerns the best choices, not those who have no choice (Jesus spoke of that - Mt 19).
- 2, Sexual desires are strong.
- 3, Most believers are lack self-control.
- 4, It is better to marry than burn.
- 5, As you are able, stay available to your spouse for sexual intimacy.
- 6, If you can be content and single, if you are not distracted and if you don't have trouble behaving, Paul thinks celibate is an easier way to live.
- 7, Both marriage and celibacy are pleasing options to God.
- 8, The priority for everyone, single and married, is to serve the Lord and be sexually pure.
- 9, Engagement is not marriage.
- 10, If you marry, make sure it is someone in the Lord.
- 11, Whatever a society calls marriage, God takes that as marriage.
- 12, Think about shorter engagements and simpler weddings.

Amen