

Sermon 22: 1 Corinthians 7:1-9: Answering Questions on Singleness and Marriage

OUTLINE

To the married
To the single

INTRODUCTION

There are two typical extremes that error falls into, legalism and license; antinomianism and asceticism. Both of these extremes are present in Corinth. We see antinomianism in the tolerance and lack of church discipline towards the case of incest; we will see high tolerances for those who participate in idol worship; it seems there is a loose view of sexuality and the body, among other problems. But we also see the opposite error of asceticism. There were wrong views about the human body prevalent in Greek philosophy that despised the body as the animal part of ourselves, as a cage for the divine spark of our spirits. Instead of viewing the body as originally good but fallen, it was viewed as a negative and something to be suppressed. These ideas filtered into Christianity placing too high a view on virginity; leading towards a view that all ministers should be celibate; even intruding itself into marriage saying that the only time a husband and wife should come together is for the purpose of procreation, or in cases of extreme temptation. The Corinthians who have shown a vulnerability to philosophical ideas are struggling with this very problem.

We come to a new section in our letter to the Corinthians. In chapters 5-6 we saw Paul dealing with three matters of great concern, incest, dragging each other to court and, sexual immorality. We can see that Paul changes direction in 7:1, 'Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman."' It is clear that the Corinthians have written to Paul seeking advice on a number of matters, Paul addresses these as well as other matters that he has heard by word of mouth. These words 'now concerning' feature several times 7:1; 7:25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1; 16:12, likely indicating specific questions asked by the Corinthians related to marriage, food offered to idols, the gifts, etc.

You will notice that there a statement in quotation marks, 'It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.' This is likely a statement from the letter written by the Corinthians that betrays the asceticism that seems to be contaminating the church and causing marital problems. The false ideas linked to the body and sex is clearer in the more literal translation 'It is good for a man not to touch a woman.' This underlying concern informs this whole chapter. If someone has a low view of the body and bodily functions including intercourse in marriage, you can imagine all the trouble that would be caused by a wrong view of the body and sex. Should Christian married couples have relations? Should we be married and celibate? Should Christians be married at all? Should Christians divorce to remain pure? What if I am married to an unbeliever am I defiled by them? What if I am engaged to be married should I go through with it? Most of what Paul is going to say in chapter 7 is in response to this over-reactive ascetic tendency. This is what makes sense of his statements about sex in marriage, celibacy not being for all, the unsaved spouse and children being holy, and his advice not commands on several matters.

Today we will be looking at v1-9. We will see that Paul needs to make some clarifying statements against the heavy handed universal statements that are hurting the Corinthians in their view of marriage and relations in marriage. V2-5 is concerned with helping those already married; and v6-9 those who are single.

To the married

V2, 'But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband.' Paul begins his push back at the legalistic universal rule that the Corinthians conveyed in their letter. The first thing he does is talk to those who are married who have wrong ideas about relations in marriage. There is one of two ways to interpret this verse, firstly, that getting married helps minimize sexual immorality, in this way Paul could be teaching that marriage is a proper aid to purity. But the second interpretation is probably the more correct one, the commentators suggest that the word 'have' is a euphemism for consummation. A euphemism is a polite way of saying something harsh or uncomfortable. In other words Paul is speaking of the danger of immorality if husbands and wives do not come together. V3-5 would then be an expansion on this idea.

Paul does not give us an exhaustive view of marital union for he is dealing with a particular situation, but he does say many positive things that help. Firstly, he tells us that those who are married 'should have' each other. Marriage comes with certain duties and obligations. Paul recognizes that sin has come into the world and is attacking marriage. Sin puts marriage under pressure in this area. When we are young we are put under pressure by inexperience and a lack of confidence; in the middle age years there is business and distraction so that things get in the way of quality time; and in the older years health challenges are the most common pressure on this area. In this instance a false legalism that views the act as unclean will result in temptation to those who are married and give opportunity to the devil. We must not think that Paul only has a negative view of things, that we need relations in marriage to keep us from sin. No, Paul would embrace the biblical teaching that marriage is made for positive things like procreation, and delighting in each other, but he is also realistic about our weaknesses and what these legalistic teachings can lead to. Ironically harsh legalism and a rejection of these bodily goods often lead to sin.

V3, 'The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband.' Paul sees marriage between one natural man and one natural woman. This is an affirmation he only makes in passing but something that we cannot take for granted today. This verse would have struck like lightning in Paul's day. In Roman culture there was a great inequality between men and women. Men were allowed to be married and have concubines, visit prostitutes and engage in other sordid activities, but women were not. If a woman committed adultery she could be divorced and lose half her dowry, a man could not be charged with adultery.¹ The fact that Paul makes sure that the fulfilling of conjugal rights is a duty both men and women must fulfill is a radical concept.

V4, '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.' Once again this is radical talk. A Roman woman would not even

¹ <https://www.pbs.org/empires/romans/empire/weddings.html>

have authority over her children if her husband died because a woman having authority in anything was seen as bad and purely a male prerogative.² So for a woman to have authority over her husband's body is a biblically informed not a culturally informed idea. The Bible teaches us that a married couple become 'one flesh' this one flesh reality informs our obligations and speaks of us having given up our independence to give ourselves to another. This is part of what we promised in our wedding vows. In the 1552 Common Book Of Prayer we have these traditional vows, "With this ring I thee wed, with my body I thee worship, with all my worldly goods I thee endow." Striking language that might be confusing but is not saying we worship another person as God, but rather it speaks of complete dedication and self-giving to another. Paul is arguing against ascetic errors by drawing on the implications of this one flesh reality and its implications of giving ourselves completely to another. In marriage we give up our independence to become a union and this includes bodily. So many today are averse to marriage and commitment because they fear to give up their independence, but this is what marriage is. Christ gave up Himself completely, giving His very body in her service; and the Bride of Christ the church returns His self-giving love with a total consecration. Marriage is a mutual self-giving to the other, and this has implications in all areas including the marriage bed.

Now I recognise that these words can sound threatening to those who have suffered being married to a selfish partner who is all demanding and no giving, who is happy to use this sense of duty of make their spouses do their will all the while being selfish. Paul is not spelling out a patriarchalist view here which enables abuse but is pushing back at a legalistic view of withholding. The same truth that one flesh means we give ourselves in service to the other not only denies ascetic withholding but also uncontrolled demanding.

V5, '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.' Here we can see Paul's concern for sexual immorality. He says that married couples should not withhold themselves from each other. He introduces another important principle and that is one of communicated consent. Because of the nature of the one flesh union no one party can set the agenda for the relationship, all things must be by agreement, by consent. Paul assumes that relations are regular and because he is dealing with the problem of ascetic denial he stresses that any abstaining must be by agreement, that it must be temporary, and that it must be for good reasons. A recent statistic says that 70% of marriages fail to a failure in this area of the marriage. Paul is calling upon Christian couples to talk, to communicate, to express their expectations and discomforts, to bring disappointments and hurts out into the open. If the couple is not clearly communicating and on the same page in this area, Paul warns that satan may gain an opportunity due to frustrations and temptations. All married couples recognize the discomfort that we feel in talking about these matters. We are at our most vulnerable in these areas. We can all identify with the sense of Adam and Eve needing to cover up and protect themselves after the fall, no longer comfortable in their nakedness before another sinner. But we have entered into a union with another, there is a proper vulnerability and transparency that we must pursue. The gospel which strips us bare in the presence of God prepares us to be open before another sinner in marriage. Once again Paul is breaking convention. Jewish men believed that they could take

² <https://pubs.lib.uiowa.edu/iowa-historical-review/article/1630/galley/110627/view/>

vows of abstinence without consulting their wives, deciding to give up all relations so that they could dedicate months and years of their lives to studying the law. Paul says, all things are by agreement. Paul recognizes that there could be seasons where intensive prayer may call for a period of abstinence but this must likewise be clearly communicated and a set time agreed upon.

Paul pushing back at these false ideas affirms marriage as good; that men and women are equal in marriage when it comes to fulfilling obligations; that relations are not evil or diminishing; we see no evidence of asceticism in Paul's teaching on marriage.

To the single

V6-7, 'Now as a concession, not a command, I say this. ⁷I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another.' Paul changes his target audience moving away from those who are married to those who are single. Marriages have been impacted by a false asceticism, but those who are single are also laboring under false ideas. In relation to the problem raised Paul sets forth some biblical ideas about singleness. V6 is very important in terms of setting the tone. Those of an ascetic mindset would command celibacy. Paul as a celibate man who has a high view of the gift of celibacy cannot command all to be celibate but he can commend it, while recognizing not everyone has this calling. Please appreciate that Paul has a qualified agreement with the sentiments of the ascetic, not because a little legalism is good, but because he recognizes that God has given some the gift to be celibate.

Paul as an ex-Pharisee was likely married, all Jews were expected to be married by the age of 20 to fulfill the command to go forth and multiply. It is suspected that Paul was married but his wife left him when he converted to Christianity. Despite his past married status Paul claims that he has the gift of celibacy. Paul is likely reflecting on the teaching of Jesus on this matter from Matt. 19:12, 'For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let the one who is able to receive this receive it.' It has been suggested that those who are born eunuchs are those born with deformities; those made eunuchs by men are those who have been castrated; and those who are eunuchs for the kingdom of God are those who are enabled to give themselves to a life of singleness and service. Paul wants to agree to the benefits of the single life, but also recognizing that not all have the gift of celibacy.

This I believe marks a drastic change between the OT and the NT. In the OT Israel would have been marrying and multiplying in obedience to the cultural mandate. Here we see that there is a change where there is a course of action for those who seek to dedicate themselves to the kingdom that they can forsake marriage for the sake of the kingdom. It is good and right to marry and have children, many modern attitudes around singleness and childlessness are driven by a godless worldview and rejection of the purpose of our bodies and their functions. Christians as a whole have a high view of marriage and childbearing, it is good and desirable and part of our purpose in being men and women in this age. But because Christ has come, and our primary task as the people of God is now to be a witness to the ends of the earth, there is a kingdom driven singleness which takes precedent above this. It is not a rejection of our created bodies as male and female and God's purpose for us in marriage, but rather the

superseding of these things in the New Creation realities these things were pointing to. Paul speaks of those converted under his ministry as his spiritual children.

Paul recognizes the sovereignty of God in the distribution of gifts, and this includes the ability to remain single in serve to the Lord. How do you know you have this gift? It is generally thought that if you are able to find contentment in your singleness and feel no compulsion to marry that your social needs are met in the extended family of the church and your network of family and friends; and your sexual impulses are under your control you may have this enabling. I see no reason to argue with that opinion.

V8-9, 'To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single, as I am. ⁹ But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion.' Here we see that Paul clearly recommends singleness. We must not miss this, we who are Protestants often have a reactionary stance towards celibacy because of its overemphasis in the Roman Catholic Church, but singleness is a blessing. I think that is an important message in our day. We are seeing some of the lowest rates of marriage. We are seeing people getting married later and later. We have categories for involuntary celibates, those who want to marry but are not married. Paul addresses the unmarried, a group that would have included those who had been divorced, and those not yet married. He also speaks specifically of the widows. This would include the widows and widowers. It is not for married people to live like single people, but those who are single have an incredible opportunity. Paul will unpack his logic further in v32-35.

Paul in addressing the various matters that the Corinthians have written about and the particular problem they are facing says that if there are any who are burning that they should marry. Once again we see that Paul sees the only proper form of singleness as chaste singleness. In the ancient world if a man had an urge he did not have to wait for marriage. Paul has a different view of things, sex is for marriage.

There is a question here though that I think we must consider. Paul talks about those with the gift of celibacy, and if you don't have the gift instead of burning you should marry. But what about our situation today where there are many who don't have the gift, and who want to marry and who are struggling with matters of self-control? Now it must be stated that Paul is responding to a particular problem and in his day with arranged marriages and the younger ages at which people were married, he did not address our modern predicament that many Christian singles find themselves in. How do we react to the issues we face where many who do not have the gift are unmarried and cannot get married despite their willingness? There has been the suggestion that celibacy can be given for a period of time and so there is a temporary gift that is received. This is possible but here is another way to think about this. Just as there are those who have the gift of mercy, but every Christian should be merciful as part of being a Christian; or just as there are those who have the gift of teaching, but it is also the responsibility of every father and husband to learn how to instruct his family; in the same way there is the gift of celibacy, and there is also the Christian discipline of contentment and self-control that all by the Spirit are able to learn and exercise. I think this is an important matter. I think there is a great temptation to resentment here as some read these verses and think that God is neither gifting them with celibacy nor providing a spouse. I think that many are

resentful thinking that they are left to suffer with no relief. This is a lie. God's grace is sufficient for every person. Any situation God in His sovereignty puts us into He provides for us to obey Him in. We are not tempted beyond our endurance. I think this is important because every single one of us will be single at some point in our lives and not everyone of us has the gift of celibacy. There is singleness in our younger years for all of us where we have to learn self-control. It is a very destructive lie to think that because you plan on getting married you can give way to your lusts and not make any gains in self-control. Sadly many a young man who has not bridled his lusts has gone into marriage and done damage to his marriage because of his wrong ideas about lust and marriage. When Paul says, it is better to marry than to burn, do not consider this permission to give way to your sinful desires. 1 Thess. 4:3-5, 'For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; ⁴that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, ⁵not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God.' Let me make something very clear, if there is a case of sexual addiction in someone's life, marriage is not the cure, the Holy Spirit is. Paul is not denying that. Paul is not saying that if you are completely unable to stop sinning sexually that you need to get married, no that would destroy your marriage as you put demands on your spouse that are selfish and unreasonable. Paul is recognizing the mitigating power of marriage in relation to the problem forced celibacy he is not addressing the matter of whether we can finally get ahold of ourselves with the help of the Spirit. I want to emphasize that when we are providentially hindered from marriage for whatever reason we do not have an excuse to sin because God's grace is sufficient. Those with the gift will find an easier time of this fight, those who do not have the gift will feel like they are in the middle of a battle more often but will be given strength to stand.

A question I was asking myself throughout preparing this sermon was, how am I going to preach the gospel through this section, let me point to the gospel in 2 ways. Firstly, the way already mentioned, that the reciprocal self-giving sacrificial love of marriage exists because the gospel first existed. God from eternity past planned for our salvation and then created. Creation, in this instance marriage has a gospel shape to it, it is a mystery which reveals the gospel. Jesus has poured Himself out in selfless love for us when we were His enemies. He climbed the highest mountain He swam the deepest sea in the sense that He suffered the wrath of God for our sins, taking the judgment day that we deserve that our sins could be forgiven. As a result our only response is one of gratitude and self-surrender; of seeking to respond in kind and give ourselves bodily as a living sacrifice to Him.

The second way I think this should draw those who are not Christians to the gospel is by recognizing the incredible generosity and wisdom of God in His instruction in these matters. We are all living in bodies with urges. We live in a world that is confused as it does not know what to do with its bodies and sexuality, they are busy hurting themselves and each other with what they are doing. And in this madness the wisdom and the goodness of God shines as He tells us about our bodies and what we are made for. He tells us about the goodness of marriage, that our bodies are made to come together in a life-long union that fulfils the needs we feel; that creates life and stability in society. Marriage and God's teaching about it is an apologetic of His truth in an age that is destroying itself with lies.