

FIRST CORINTHIANS

Sexual Responsibilities Within Marriage I Corinthians 7:1-7

The Bible is the most practical book ever written. It not only deals with deep spiritual things but it also gets down to the "nitty-gritty" of life. On the matters of sex in marriage it gives practical advice, and if this advice is followed, there will be strong, dynamic and happy marriages among Christians. In First Corinthians seven, we are faced with a forthright and blunt passage on sexual responsibilities in marriage. Hopefully, this message will not offend anyone.

We must remember this section is Holy Scripture, and God has put it into the Bible for a definite purpose. Furthermore, it is truth Christians desperately need to hear.

Corinth was the "sin city" of the ancient world. It was a seaport and sailors, merchants and traders were everywhere. This was the "good time" city of ancient Greece. Looking over the city was the famous Temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of sex, and the temple was served by a thousand female and male prostitutes. All the religious people in that city (which was just about everybody) were deeply involved in illicit sex because this was part of their worship to their gods and goddesses. You can be sure foreign sailors on leave in Corinth were quick converts to that heathen religion. It was as difficult to keep one's marriage vows in Corinth as it is in America today. Sexual looseness ran as wild in the streets of that wicked city of Corinth as it does in ours today. In chapter seven, Paul gives practical advice on how Christians can be on guard against sexual looseness in marriage. It is explicit, down to earth advice and it is needed as much today as it ever was in Corinth.

Apparently some of the Christians in Corinth were reacting against the sexual looseness and decided that sex, all sex, inside and outside of marriage should be avoided. So Paul wrote to correct this perverted thinking and to lay down the biblical way for preventing sexual immorality, whether it be premarital or extra-marital.

MARRIAGE IS THE BASIC STATE 7:1

Now for the matters you wrote about. In the first six chapters of First Corinthians, Paul dealt with some of the disorders in the Corinthian church which had been reported to him. In this chapter, he answers some of the questions asked him in a letter written by the Corinthians to him. Whenever Paul answers a question he introduces it with the words, "Now for the matters." The first question was about marriage and celibacy.

Corinth was a sex-oriented society much like the American culture, and some of the Christians were having a difficult time handling their sex drives. Apparently, some of the Christians in Corinth were teaching the single state was superior to the married state, and that marriage should be the exception rather than the rule. They taught celibacy was a superior state to marriage. This, of course, was a reaction to the sexual perversion in that wicked city, and it resulted in a stern ascetic practice of rigid self-denial.

We must keep in mind when Paul wrote this letter he had a particular problem in view; that is, a perversion about sex in marriage and the exalting of the celibate state. These Christians were tempted to take a vow of celibacy, to renounce marriage and withdraw from all contact with the opposite sex.

It is good for a man not to marry. The NIV seeks to give an interpretation rather than a translation here. This literally says, "It is good for a man not to touch a woman." When Paul says, "It is good for a man not to touch a woman," he is not referring to holding a girl's hand or kissing your boyfriend goodnight, but it is a euphemism referring to sexual relationships within marriage.

"The idiom "to touch a woman" occurs nine times in Greek antiquity, ranging across six centuries and a variety of writers, and in every instance, without ambiguity it refers to having sexual intercourse" (Gordon Fee, I Corinthians).

In essence, what Paul is saying is that it is good not to marry. The word "good" can mean "honorable" so what Paul is saying is that it is honorable to stay unmarried that is, a person is not weird, abnormal or perverted if he or she does not marry. The single state is OK with God.

Later on in this chapter, he will give many reasons why it is a wise thing to stay single. The single state is good. It does not make one morally superior or more spiritual. In fact, celibacy is the exception rather than the rule. While singlehood is good, marriage is also good.

During the Middle Ages, monasticism sprung up primarily to get so-called holy men and women separated from the world. Monks and nuns withdrew from all contact with the world, viewing sex as defiling, dirty and unworthy. They viewed celibates as more spiritual than married people. These folks built monasteries, completely separating men and woman so as to remove all contact with the opposite sex and to reduce the struggle with sexual temptation. They probably used First Corinthians 7:1 as their chief proof text. But it did not work. Monasticism proved to be a disaster. Why? Because people cannot run away from the God-given sex drives within them. The vast majority of Christians in this world will marry and not stay single.

"Sexuality is always evil because there is in it an excess of pleasure so that in the act it is impossible to contemplate God" (Thomas Aquinas, Medieval Theologian).

We will learn in First Corinthians 7:7 that celibacy is a gift from God and only a few have this gift. While singlehood is the exception, marriage is the norm for most people. One cannot escape the problem of sex by disowning or ignoring the sex drives in the body. Furthermore, a person is not more spiritual when he or she pretends to ignore the body. To do that may expose one to even stronger temptations.

MARRIAGE PREVENTS SEXUAL IMMORALITY 7:2

But since there is so much immorality. While celibacy is not wrong, the Apostle Paul stresses that in the sex-oriented culture of Corinth, where temptations abounded, marriage is necessary for most people. All kinds of sexual immoralities, both heterosexual and homosexual, existed in Corinth. Paul was for maintaining sexual purity, so he suggests the way to prevent premarital and extra-marital sex is to get married and have a normal, healthy and stable sex life. To put it in our vernacular, Paul is saying the way to keep unmarried people from having affairs and the married from cheating on their spouses is to marry and have a healthy sex life. It does help to be married in any sex-oriented society.

Just to avoid sexual immorality seems like a low motive for marriage. However, this is not the only reason for marriage. It is to be entered into for many reasons. First, it is to share life with a partner in a lifelong commitment to serve God together. Second, it is to cultivate mutual love. According to Genesis 2:18-25, Adam and Eve were enjoying sex long before there was any sin in this world and before there were any children. God designed sex to bring mutual pleasure to His married creatures and to produce the highest kind of love between two people. The Bible affirms over and over again that sex is good, right, pure and holy because God thought it up. The sex drive is normal within every man or woman and it is nothing to be ashamed of as God's creatures. This sex drive is to be controlled outside of marriage, and to be released within marriage with God's full approval. There is nothing two married people can do in private, under the approving eye of God, which is sinful as long as any act does not become morally offensive to one partner or the other. God fully intended the saved to have more fun with sex in marriage than the unsaved can have anywhere else. Third, God gave sex to reproduce the human race and to establish the family which is the basic unit of life. Fourth, God gave sex to prevent sexual immorality. This does not suggest we should only get married to get release from sex drives, but this is one of the reasons. However, even marriage does not take away all sex drives and desire for the opposite sex, but it does take off the pressure. Even in marriage couples must deal with attractions, fantasies and infatuations about other men and women. When this happens, we have a spiritual problem which must be dealt with honestly before God and our mate.

The Apostle Paul gives some advice on sex in marriage which is quite explicit. Some have wondered where Paul received this knowledge because at the time of this writing he was a single man. There is some evidence that Paul was probably married at one time in his life. It was a stigma for young Jewish men not to marry. Jewish tradition said, "A Jew who has no wife is not a man" (Gen. 5:2; Yehamoth, f. 63,1). Furthermore, Paul was a member of the Sanhedrin at one time. We know this because he tells us he cast his vote against the Christians (Acts 26:10). To be a member of the Sanhedrin required one be married. What happened to Paul's wife is not known. She may have died or she may have deserted because of Paul's strong Christian beliefs. Whatever, Paul knew from experience what a healthy sex life meant to a marriage.

Each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband. This is God's way to prevent premarital and extra-marital sexual relationships. Notice carefully each person is to have his own wife or husband not someone else's wife or husband.

This teaches indirectly several concepts: 1) No Polygamy. This is a command; therefore Paul is forbidding the plurality of husbands and wives. In the Roman world, a wife was chattel, a work horse. Generally a man had several wives—one had charge of the kitchen, another of the living area and perhaps another was in charge of the clothing. Apart from having children with his wives, the man generally went to a prostitute for pleasurable sex. Paul commands a man and a woman to have one wife or husband who is loved. Christ lifted the state of womanhood to that of a partner in love with a man. 2) Monogamy. Paul teaches one man for one woman because that is God's ideal as set forth in the life of Adam and Eve. Monogamy produces the highest love between two married people because God has ordained it. Sexual satisfaction is not found with many partners but with one. Many affairs before marriage, wife swapping or adulterous relationships never satisfy. Why? Only monogamy produces the highest form of sexual love, and only Christians can reach the apex of sexual fulfillment. Sex is a physical and animal act. This is the lowest form of sex. Many people are just one step above an animal in their sex lives. Sex is also an emotional act, involving the whole man, and this is why some non-Christians can reach high levels of sexual love in a monogamous relationship. Sex is also a spiritual act therefore only Christians who are filled with the Spirit can reach the highest forms of sexual satisfaction. This happens because Christians see sex from God's perspective, and this frees men and women to enjoy the act without guilt or fear.

MARRIAGE PARTNERS HAVE A SEXUAL DEBT TO ONE ANOTHER 7:3

The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife. The husband owes his wife a debt, not only to love her as Christ loved the Church and gave Himself for it, but to fulfill his sexual duty to her. A husband has a duty to meet his wife's sexual needs. To do this, he must spend time with her; he must communicate with her; he must listen to her, and he must provide security for her. A woman's sex life is tied up with her psychic, and her needs must first be met on a caring and understanding level before she can respond and find fulfillment in the sex act.

And likewise the wife to her husband. The wife owes her husband a debt, not only to submit to him as the Lord Jesus has commanded her but to fulfill his sexual needs. A wife has a duty to meet her husband's sexual needs. To do this she must psychologically prepare herself, set times in her busy schedule for it, not become overly tired, and give attention to her husband over her children. When a man does not have his sexual needs met, he becomes a "bear" to live with, and when his sex needs are met, it is like a tranquilizer to him and he becomes a teddy bear.

Sex is not only an exciting experience to be entered into when one feels like it, but it is a moral obligation. Marital infidelity can be overcome when husbands and wives recognize marriage is a contract in which husband and wife owe it to each other to be sexually responsible. Calling marriage a contract may not be very romantic, but that is how the Scriptures look at it. Sex is a duty and it is as much a Christian duty as reading the Bible, praying or witnessing. To fail to pay a sexual debt to our partner is sin. Infidelity takes many forms. Everybody harps on the adultery angle of unfaithfulness, but there is also non-adulterous infidelity which undermines a marriage. Men or women who play the game of "freeze out" with their partners are guilty of the worst kind of immorality. They do not realize the meeting of the sex need in their partner is a moral obligation. Those who do not fulfill this responsibility are guilty of non-adulterous unfaithfulness.

"It (sex) is something each partner 'owes' to the other. So it should never be used as a bribe or reward for good behavior or as something to be withheld as a threat or punishment. Husband and wife alike must be sensitive to the emotional and physical states of each other and not insist on sex on demand. But neither should one partner consistently try to get out of satisfying his or her spouse's conjugal needs (Craig Blomberg, I Corinthians).

Christian love is as much a matter of the mind and will as of the emotions. For one partner to turn away the other simply complicates the problem. To ignore one another drives a deep wedge between husband and wife. There are, however, legitimate times to go without sex such as when one is sick, during a woman's period, a few weeks before a baby is due and a six weeks after a baby has arrived.

The sexual aspect of marriage is vitally linked up with our spiritual war with the Lord Jesus. A husband or wife's happiness in his or her sex life has a great affect on the spiritual life. Healthy married love is essential for a happy home.

MARRIAGE PARTNERS ARE TO HAVE MUTUAL RECOGNITION OF SEXUAL RIGHTS 7:4

The wife's body does not belong to her alone but also to her husband. In the same way, the husband's body does not belong to him alone but also to his wife. Before marriage a person does exercise authority over his body as to how it will be used sexually. The person is to honor the body as the temple of God and keep it sexually pure. Yet, at the moment a person says, "I do," the body belongs to the person he or she marries. At that moment, a person forfeits his or her rights to exercise authority over his or her own body and has surrendered that authority to his or her marriage partner.

Notice carefully it does not say marriage partners are to demand their rights at all costs, but they are to give up their rights to meet the sexual needs of the partner. This is a basic law of life. The only way to get your needs met and yourself fulfilled is to fulfill another's needs. In the process of devoting yourself to the enjoyment of your mate and to giving him or her the most exquisite sense of pleasure you can, you find your own needs met. This is not saying you are slaves to one another, each demanding his or her rights, but the power to give fulfillment to your mate lies in you, and in so doing, your needs will be met. To have this kind of attitude demands you have an adult kind of love. A child's concept of love is getting, but an adult's is giving. There are entirely too many "child marriages" these days in which adults behave like babies. They value marriage only because of what it does for them, but they do not see it as a means of investing in the one loved. Yet, this difference between getting and giving is actually the major difference between love and lust. Christian love always seeks the highest good of the person loved, not merely its own satisfaction.

The breakdown of many marriages can be directly traced to the bedroom. Divorce occurs when we want to get instead of give. We need to understand that God has made us with the capacity to meet someone else's need sexually. This is why unresponsiveness and frigidity in marriage cause deep psychological problems and a rift occurs. God has given us the ability to give a gift of love and response to another person, and the joy of doing so is what creates the ecstasy of sexual love in marriage.

MARRIAGE PARTNERS ARE NOT TO ROB ONE ANOTHER 7:5a

Do not deprive each other. The word "deprive" actually means "to rob" or "to defraud." Christians have no right to deprive their mates of sexual fulfillment and enjoyment. If sexual rights are withheld, the Christian is actually robbing his or her mate of what is rightfully theirs.

Apparently there were some at Corinth who were habitually abstaining from the sex act with their mates, thinking this was a higher state of morality and a true mark of spirituality. Although the conditions have changed drastically from the first century to our day, the fact tragically still remains with us. Today many Christians are robbing their mates of sexual enjoyment and doing it in the name of God and under the cloak of spirituality. If Paul were here today, he would say, "Stop this nonsense at once!"

MARRIAGE PARTNERS MAY AGREE TO HAVE A CESSATION OF THE SEX ACT 7:5b

Except by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. A husband and wife may agree to a cessation period for the sex act or a definite spiritual purpose—that they may concentrate on prayer to God. The word “devote” means “to have leisure.” Cessation is done so a couple may give themselves leisurely to prayer without distractions. Cessation is a good thing but it must always be by mutual consent, temporary in nature and for a spiritual purpose.

“When Paul says “except by mutual consent,” he is making it clear that one partner in the marriage relationship does not have the right to control the sexual decisions. The practical advice of this is that a husband does not have the right to be saying every night, “Sorry, ‘Sorry, honey; I’m just too tired,’ nor does the wife have the divine freedom to say every evening, “I’m sorry, honey; but I have a headache” (Knofel Staton, I Corinthians).

MARRIAGE PARTNERS ARE NOT TO CONTINUE IN THE STATE OF CESSATION 7:5c

Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. Paul puts his finger on what is one of the most frequent causes of disaster in marriage: a unilateral refusal to grant the gift of enjoyment and pleasure to one’s mate. If a cessation period is agreed upon, do not refuse each other too long, lest Satan get the advantage, temptations arise and adultery occurs.

This verse tells us who is the power behind the scene in the breakup of so many marriages. It is Satan himself, and he is out to destroy Christians and Christian homes. That is why we are told in Scripture to beware of the wiles or strategies of the devil.

“Equally, if true giving to each other in sexual intercourse is the essence of a union where God has joined two individuals together, then Satan will do his worst in inhibiting, spoiling, robbing it of its purity and its fulfilling potential. Satan is always active in a Christian marriage, to quench shared prayer and to reduce the joys of sex to his own debased level” (David Prior, I Corinthians).

MARRIAGE AND CELIBACY ARE GIFTS FROM GOD 7:6-7

I say this as a concession, not as a command. Paul is not commanding people to get married. Marriage is not a “must.” It is by permission and not commandment Paul has laid down the duties of all who are married, but he does not lay it down as a duty that all should be married.

I wish that all men were as I am. Paul's wish was that all could be like him -- single, free and satisfied without wife or family, but practically he knew that this would not be the way for the vast majority of men and women.

But each man has his own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that. Here we are told there is a special gift from God of celibacy (the ability to stay single). The person must determine for himself whether he or she has this gift. A person who has the gift of celibacy might have a fierce independent spirit and would not fare well in a marriage where dependency is essential. This person might not feel the need for someone else to complete or fulfill him or her. And most certainly the person with the gift of celibacy has the ability to control his or her sex drives and must be committed to a life of sexual purity.

"It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the heathen, . . ." (I Thess. 4:3-4a).

If a person has the gift of celibacy that person must never marry or marriage will be a disaster.

On the other hand, there is a gift to marry. If a person has the gift to marry, it would be a tragedy to remain unmarried. The man who has this gift has the capacity to love, and the woman who has this gift has the capacity to submit.

CONCLUSION

We must take God's Word seriously on the subject of sex in marriage. What does God want us Christians to learn from this passage of Scripture? First, as a Christian husband or wife, you alone of all people on earth can, with God's blessing, satisfy the deep need of the person you married. A man can hire a maid to clean his house or a cook to prepare his food, but only his wife can meet this need for sexual expression with the approval of heaven. A husband is the only person on earth whose purity can satisfy the need for affection in his wife. Second, you may have to arrange your life so that sex in marriage has a higher place on your list of important things. You may have to cut down on the work load at home or the office, or the outside activities at church or in the community to pay this debt to your wife or husband. Third, you, as a Christian, must remember the greatest safeguard to a husband's sexual purity is the affection of a devoted wife, and the greatest guarantee of a woman's faithfulness is the devotion of an affectionate husband.

Are you a non-Christian? Is your sex life in shambles? Is your marriage on the rocks?

Has divorce become a viable option for you? Before you do anything drastic, please consider Jesus Christ and what He has to say about marriage, sex in marriage and relationships between a husband and wife. Jesus Christ has the answer to all who bow to Him as Savior and Lord and seek to follow Him by doing the things He has commanded in the Bible. Christ can take a marriage on the brink of disaster and put it

back together, giving a new dimension, a new spark and a new dynamic to it. Jesus Christ changes marriages by first changing lives!