

March 13, 2011
Singleness, Marriage and More
1 Corinthians 7

When you write a letter (or an email or a text), it is always contextual. Yes, it may have some interesting things you can pull out for other places and times, but first and foremost, it is a personal communication with someone in a particular place at a particular time. 1 Corinthians is a *letter* Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, apparently in response to a letter they had written to him. It's important to remember that as we consider some of the specific issues he addresses ...

"Now for matters you wrote about ..."

Note carefully how this section begins! *"Now for the matters you wrote about ..."* What we call Chapter 7, verse 1, is really just a new paragraph in his letter. It is one of several times where he picks up on an idea in their letter and addresses it (see also 7:25, 8:1, 15:1, 16:1).

What was the matter they wrote about? The KJV says *"It is good for a man not to touch a woman."* The original NIV says, *"It is good for a man not to marry."* Note the footnote in the original NIV, however, which is the preferred translation in the ©2010 NIV: *"It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman."* The Greek words actually say *"It is good for a man not touch a woman,"* however, the Greek idiom *"to touch a woman"* means in a sexual way.¹ So the NIV footnote/©2010 is the best translation.

Who said, *"It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman"*? Was it Paul? Or was it the Corinthians? We tend to read 1 Corinthians from our context and assume this is Paul saying don't get married! But if we read this whole section, it is clear that Paul is not anti-marriage! In fact he calls it a gift from God (7:1)! The Corinthians, however, had some warped views on marriage (7:2-16)! Paul is quoting from the letter the Corinthians wrote to him. They were the ones saying, *"It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman."*² They were promoting abstinence, for all, including married folks.

Why? Last week we saw one group in the Corinthian church who had no sexual morals. Anything went! Paul spoke firmly to that, emphasizing that sexuality is a core part of who we are, and is only properly expressed in the context of marriage. Another group in the church taught the exact opposite - an ascetic group was teaching that celibacy was best for everyone - even those who were married. They were telling married people not to have normal sexual relations (2-7) even to separate or get divorced (10-11); they were telling unmarried people not to marry (8-9); they were telling Christians married to non-Christians to divorce them (12-16).

¹See G. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, p.275; C. Blomberg, *1 Corinthians*.

²Fee, Blomberg, C.K. Barret (*The First Epistle to the Corinthians*), Wm. Barclay (*The Letters to the Corinthians*), W.H. Mare (*The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Vol. 10*), all agree this is a quotation from what the Corinthians wrote, not Paul's beliefs!

Paul takes these people on, and says, "No!" In vs. 2-7, Paul argues sexual relations are a normal part of marriage. He never suggests that married people give up sexual relations.

In vs. 8-9, Paul turns from the currently married to those who are unmarried and previously married. The ascetics were saying they should never marry. Paul says it is good if they stay single. But it is also good if they marry. Both singleness and marriage are gifts from God (v.7).

In vs. 10-16, Paul takes on the ascetics who encouraged married couples (where both spouses were Christians or one spouse was a Christian) to prefer divorce over marriage if they could not abstain from sexual relations. That, he says, is nonsense!

What does it mean for us?

This passage appears to have been written by Paul in response to a group of Christians who urged Christians - married or unmarried - to be celibate. Now there aren't a whole lot of people in our day and age encouraging anyone to abstain from sexual relationships! Quite the contrary, in fact! Our culture is probably much more on the hedonistic side (1 Corinthians 6:12-20) than on the ascetic side! So does this passage have anything to say to us?

God's good gifts: Marriage and Singleness

The Roman Catholic tradition has used this passage to insist on celibacy as a requirement for priests and various religious orders. But Paul doesn't teach that, does he? He says "*I wish all of you were as I am* (we assume that means single), *but ...*" (v.7).

Those of us in the Protestant tradition often overreact in the opposite extreme. We assume marriage is the ideal for everyone! If we're single there's something wrong with us! Some churches are so geared to "families" that singles can feel like second class citizens. Or, uncomfortable with single people, they desperately try to "marry them off." Paul continues to emphasize that each of us has our own "*gift from God; one has this gift, another has that.*" Marriage is a gift from God. Singleness is also a gift from God.

The problem Paul is addressing in 1 Corinthians 7 is a group of people who are saying, "*Marriage is bad. Sex, within marriage, is bad! Even if you're married, live a celibate life. Or better yet, get divorced!*" That may sound strange to us! But we have inherited vestiges of their thought ...

Some Christians have viewed sex as inherently "dirty." But a biblical theology of human sexuality recognizes that from the very beginning God created us as sexual beings. Our sexuality is part of how we were created - and created "good" by God. It is a gift from God! Our sexuality is not some "dirty" thing that came as a result of Adam and Eve's sin. Sex was created to be expressed as a beautiful part of the marriage relationship between a man and a woman.

Of course, like all good things God created, sin has affected our sexuality. We struggle to express it in healthy, God-honouring ways. Single and married people wrestle with lust, guilt, and other difficult emotions. We battle with the truth that our sexuality can only be expressed, in a healthy way, in marriage. But these struggles do not undermine the truth that God created us as sexual beings - and that sex, in marriage is good!

For many of us, God has called us to be married. That is a good gift from God - but not always paradise. Richard England writes, "*Our most intimate relationships can be the most rewarding, but also the most difficult. Negotiating intimacy, security and significance in close relationships can be extraordinarily painful. Few of us do so without receiving wounds in the process.*"

Paul also strongly affirms that singleness is God's good gift to many people, too! Marriage (and sex) are not the be all and end all! They are not the ideal for everyone. In our hyper-sexualized culture, we can get the impression that if we are not in a sexual relationship (and, thus, in a Christian context, married) we are impoverished people. But Paul is quite clear that God can give us a gift of being single, too. It's all good.

Divorce and Remarriage

Paul introduces the thorny question of divorce and remarriage. This whole topic of course, is a bit of a minefield. I simply want to remind us what Jesus said about divorce (Matthew 5:31-32, 19:9-12). Marriages aren't always ideal. There are all sorts of reasons. We all know many of them. When differences appear to be irreconcilable, some people choose to get divorced. Once someone is divorced, some churches will not have anything more to do with them. Those people are perceived to have crossed the line, broken God's ideal for marriage, and are unwelcome - or may be welcome as long as they don't want to get remarried.

Jesus was concerned that we do not see marriage as disposable. He (like Paul in 6:16) draws attention to Genesis to emphasize that marriage is serious business and must never "be entered into lightly." Jesus is also concerned for more than just the letter of the law. Just as murder is more than actually sticking a knife in someone (Matthew 5:21-26), adultery is more than actually having a sexual relationship with someone (Matthew 5:27-30), divorce is more than a legal agreement. Parallel to previous passages Jesus might say, "*You have heard it said, 'Do not get divorced except for this reason.' But I tell you that anyone who does not love his/her spouse with a pure, holy love (but who looks lustfully at others, who cohabits with his/her spouse but does not really love them) has already divorced them in his/her heart.*" Some people are legally married, but for all intents and purposes are divorced!

We also need to remember that in God's eyes, falling short of His ideal in anything is sin ... and no one sin is less serious - or more serious - than another. God does not deal in shades of grey. Sin is sin. It all separates us from God. All sin has to be confessed. All has to be forgiven. Any of us who sin (and be honest, who among us can say we are perfect?) are in need of God's

forgiveness and renewing. We all are challenged to repent (that is, change the direction of our lives), accept Jesus as our Saviour, and begin again. Yes, divorce is not God's ideal. Ever. But in a fallen world with fallen people it happens. We deal with it, and we move on ...

When a woman caught in the act of adultery was brought to Jesus what was His reaction to her accusers? *"If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her."* (John 8:7) We need the humility to recognize that for any number of reasons we all fail. We all stand in need of God's grace. And all of us, however we have failed, need to hear how Jesus dealt with that woman. Jesus words were, *"Go now, and sin no more."* (John 8:11)

Divorce leaves us in unpleasant territory! And yet it is precisely on unpleasant turf that Christ so often meets us.

Sin is sin, whether it be related to adultery, anger, dishonesty, selfishness, pride, lack of charity, lust, criticism, bitterness, divorce, etc., etc.

God accepts repentant people who earnestly and honestly want to make a new start with forgiveness and love. He accepts anyone who invites Jesus to be his/her Saviour. There is none of us who have done anything that God cannot forgive. His challenge is that we also strive to live obediently with Jesus as our Lord, as well. In the case of marriage (whether our first marriage or a subsequent one), that means we aim for the ideal of marriage - a relationship of pure, unselfish, honest love. A love that is committed for a lifetime and endeavours to make it work.

The Power of Influence

Paul also introduces the whole issue of influence. If we are a spouse living with a non-Christian spouse we can have a tremendous influence upon them! Note, however, Paul emphasizes that a Christian/non-Christian marriage is not the ideal - don't deliberately enter this type of relationship - Scripture calls it being "unequally yoked" (2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1)! (this has consequences for dating and all sorts of things). But if you become a believer and your spouse is not one, there is the possibility that you can influence that person to faith. But dating and marriage were never intended to be a mission field!

What's it all about? - Love!

In Ephesians 5:21-33, Paul explores marriage much more fully. The bottom line is love - selfless, self-giving, sacrificial love (1 Corinthians 13). That, Paul says, is the key to marriage. It's also the key to all our relationships - whether we're married or single! Read 1 John 4:7-12.

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