

1 Corinthians 7:1-7 - “God’s Good Gifts of Marriage & Singleness”

Introduction

We will be continuing our series verse-by-verse through 1 Corinthians. Today we will be studying 1 Corinthians 7:1-7 together, so please start turning there in your Bibles...

We have seen so far in 1 Corinthians 5 & 6 how the Apostle Paul has addressed the reports of sexual sins like incest, fornication, and adultery that were taking place within the Corinthian church. Now, here in 1 Corinthians 7, Paul is going to continue addressing topics regarding sexuality. Specifically, the topics of marriage, marital intimacy, & singleness.

Let’s begin by reading this passage together. **1 Corinthians 7:1-7...**

You know, I praise God for the practicality of the Bible. And specifically, I praise God for the practicality of this passage before us today.

The topics of marriage, sexual intimacy, and singleness are such practical & applicable topics for everyone in here today. Like the Corinthians, I am sure many in here today have questions about & or need help in one of these areas. For example, in the realm of marriage & intimacy, an ACBC counselor & professor at my seminary named Stuart Scott has said that, in his personal experience, about 80% of his counseling cases is marriage counseling, and about 60-70% of his marriage counseling cases will deal with problems regarding sexual intimacy. Also, in the realm of singleness, we are living in a time where about 50% of the adult population is single, which is roughly double the amount compared to the 1950s. And specifically within the church context, many Christians express frustration & difficulty in dealing with prolonged singleness.

So, it is safe to say that this passage we are examining today is just as relevant today as it ever has been in history. Whether you are married or single or have questions/problems in these areas, this passage is going to speak to you.

That is b/c what we are going to see in 1 Corinthians 7:1-7 is that Paul explains the two gifts of marriage and singleness so that you may embrace and enjoy God’s design for your life. In this text, the apostle explains under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit that Marriage is a Gift from God and Singleness is a Gift from God and both offer unique blessings. And it's my prayer today that each person here would leave with a greater understanding and appreciation of the blessings and gifts of marriage and singleness, which will lead to embracing and enjoying God’s good design and plans for your life...

Let us begin by first looking at The Gift of Marriage in v. 1-6.

I. The Gift of Marriage (7:1-6)

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With this chapter in 1 Corinthians, we reach a new part of the book. To this point, Paul has been addressing the issues occurring in the Corinthian Church that had been reported to him through “Chloe’s people.” But, now beginning in Ch. 7, we have a transition.

In 7:1, Paul writes, “Now concerning the things about which you wrote.” Throughout the rest of the book, we are going to find numerous of these “now concerning X, Y, or Z” statements from Paul. From here on out, Paul is going to start responding to numerous topics & questions the Corinthians had written to him about in a letter. And here in 7:1, we find the first one.

The Apostle writes in v.1, “Now concerning the things about which you wrote, it is good for a man not to touch a woman.” So, I believe that what we have here is not a statement originating from Paul, but from the Corinthians. This phrase, “it is good for a man not to touch a woman,” was something that the Corinthians had written in their letter to Paul. This is why numerous translations (ESV, NIV, CSB) put this section in quotations. And this phrase “not to touch” was a common euphemism at the time that referred to having sexual relations. So what the Corinthians were saying is that it is good for people to remain celibate and not engage in sexual intercourse.

And in a certain sense, this statement from the Corinthians could be right. This statement is agreeable if what is meant by it is that it is good and ok for unmarried individuals to remain single and celibate. This statement could contain some truth, but it depends on exactly what a person meant by it.

So, Paul brings up & refers to this statement from the Corinthians and he is going to put some qualifiers on it. He wants them to make sure that the Corinthians don’t fall into falsehood. He is going to make some qualifying remarks that will hopefully head them off from reaching false conclusions.

This is very similar to what we saw last week in 6:12-13. The Corinthians were saying things like “All things are lawful for me,” but Paul responded with the qualifying statements “but not all things are profitable” and “I will not be mastered by anything.” In like manner, here in 7:1, Paul is also giving qualifying and corrective responses to the Corinthians’ words.

The Corinthians were saying: “It is good for a man not to touch a woman” (i.e., for individuals not to engage in sexual activities). Yet the Apostle’s response to this statement of theirs is this in v.2: “But because of immoralities, each man is to have his own wife, and each woman is to have her own husband.”

Here, Paul gives his apostolic and pastoral response. In response to the Corinthians about celibacy, the Apostle Paul makes the proclamation that it is good for men & women to pursue marriage & seek to “have” a husband or wife & enjoy the sexual intimacy that it provides.

And notice the reasoning & rationale he offers about this statement. He says that it is “because of immoralities” that Christians should pursue this. This word “immoralities” is *porneia* in the Greek, which is a word that speaks of any sexual sin. And Paul uses the plural form of this word, denoting the vastness of potential sexual sins that exist.

See, the fact of the matter is that we as humans were created as sexual beings. Having sexual desire/drive is hardwired within us. And this is not bad! It is how God made us! This is our natural/God-ordained design & it is good/right/normal.

However, these sexual desires can only be expressed in a God-honoring way in the covenant of marriage. The only lawful place where any sexual activity can take place is in the confines of marriage. This means that for those who have a natural sexual drive, singleness is going to be a very tough situation.

So, Paul is saying that: because of the vast amount of potential sexual sins that exist for a man or woman due to their natural/normal sexual design, then each person should seek to have a spouse b/c this is the lawful outlet to express their sexual desires. Put another way, Paul says in 1 Corinthians 7:9: “But if they do not have self-control, let them marry; for it is better to marry than to burn with passion.” Due to the great dangers of sexual sin, then a legitimate/good/valid reason for men & women to pursue marriage is to be able to enjoy their natural desire for sexual intimacy.

Marriage & marital intimacy are good gifts that God has created. And it is because of this fact (that most people have a good & natural desire for companionship & intimacy), then marriage is to be the *normative* course of action for *most* Christians.

However, with that said, if you were to talk to the Apostle Paul, he would not tell you that this is *the only* reason to marry. Paul is not attempting to provide an exhaustive explanation of the reasons to pursue marriage. That is simply demanding too much from the text. We know from other sections of Paul’s writings & other sections of the Bible that there are numerous good reasons to pursue marriage.

John MacArthur in his commentary notes that marriage is good for: partnership, picturing the relationship between Christ & the Church, and procreation (just to name a few). But, he also notes that marriage is good for providing pure pleasure. What is meant by this is that marriage provides sexual pleasure in the context of purity. Within the pure & sanctified context, covenant, & confines of marriage, husbands & wives are able to enjoy pleasure. The marriage bed is pure & holy. And Proverbs 5:18-19 says to “rejoice in the wife of your youth” and “always be intoxicated with her love.” That is talking about the pleasure of love in marriage. And marriage offers the one holy & lawful place where this can happen in a God-honoring fashion.

So, while a desire for sexual intimacy is not the *only* reason for pursuing the gift of marriage or the *sole purpose* of marriage, Paul is saying that it is *a valid* reason for pursuing the gift of marriage.

So, in response to the Corinthians' statement about celibacy, Paul responds by saying, actually because of men's & women's natural sexual desires, it is good to have a spouse & enjoy a spouse. The Bible is proclaiming that marriage & marital intimacy are good/holy gifts that God gives.

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And actually, once men & women are married, engaging in sexual relations isn't just a nice thing they can decide to engage in, but it is actually *commanded*. Look at vs. 3. Paul writes, "The husband must fulfill his duty to his wife, and likewise also the wife to her husband."

In this verse, Paul explains that sexual intimacy within marriage is not optional. A husband & wife have a Christian duty & responsibility to one another to engage in marital intimacy.

And this word translated "duty/right/responsibility" (depending on your translation) is actually a very interesting word for Paul to use. The Greek word used was from the world of business and commerce. It literally means a "debt." It refers to something that you owe someone.

It's like a mortgage agreement. If you have a mortgage, you have signed a contract that states that you have agreed to pay a certain amount of money. You have a debt that you have to pay. Likewise, sexual intimacy is something that you owe your spouse. Whether you knew it or not, when you agreed to get married, you signed up for this. This was a part of the contract (so to speak). Sexual intimacy is something that is to take place in marriage & you can't hold that back from your spouse. You have a contractual obligation to your spouse.

So, to anyone married in here who is refusing sexual intimacy with your spouse or using sometimes withholding sexual intimacy & using it as a bargaining chip to manipulate the other person to get what you want (i.e., "I won't have sex without unless you agree with me or do exactly what I want you to"), then, I say this in love and b/c I want you to be rightly walking with Lord, but the Bible says that is sin & you need to repent. To cut off your spouse from sexual intimacy is to fail to fulfill a Christian duty that God has given to you...

Now, with that said, that may seem kind of cold to some of you. Is marital intimacy really to be looked at as just a business transaction between a husband & a wife? And the answer to that is: no. Paul is giving us a bottom-line/matter-of-fact statement here so that nobody can walk away thinking sexual intimacy is an optional or take-it-or-leave-it thing. However, sexual intimacy is *not merely* an obligation.

While, at the end of the day, it is something that is owed to the other person, each married couple should be striving to get to the point where sexual relations in marriage are a natural, wanted, & enjoyable thing. Sex is really just the capstone expression of a healthy marriage. And if this isn't the case, then this should be like the check engine light popping up on your dashboard. You need to investigate further & find out why.

Lou Priolo writes in *The Complete Husband*: "Sexual difficulties are typically symptomatic—that is, they are not usually the real problem but are the by-product of other problems in the relationship." If there are problems in the sexual department, it is probably because there are difficulties in the relational department. This means that you are going to have to resolve any conflicts that you may have in your marriage. You are going to have to communicate and talk with your spouse about how things are going & what each person would like to see change. You are going to have to start intentionally loving your spouse in non-sexual ways. You are going to have to do the hard work of kindling a healthy *relational* life with your spouse if you hope to have a healthy *sexual* life with your spouse.

B/c, (unless there is something medically or physically holding something back) when a husband & wife are loving each other & are right relationally, sexual intimacy will usually be a natural by-product. Intimacy is the capstone expression of a healthy marriage.

So, yes, Paul does lay down the command that intimacy is a Christian duty that a husband & wife owe each other. But don't just settle for cold/reluctant/obligatory intimacy. Let every married person in here be shooting for more than that. Put in the hard work in your marital relationship and you'll be surprised how sexual relations in marriage will not just be an obligatory thing, but a natural/wanted/enjoyable thing.

But Paul continues this topic in the next verse. Look at v.4. He supports his previous statement by writing this: "The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband *does*; and likewise also the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife *does*."

The Apostle explains that a married person's body belongs to their spouse. What this means is that, in marriage, you fully give yourself over to your spouse. You give all of yourself to them. Solomon expresses this same truth when he writes in Song of Songs 6:3, "I am my beloved's, And my beloved is mine." Really, v.4 demonstrates the one-flesh nature of marriage. The two have become one. You are no longer just your own, but you belong to your spouse.

B/c a husband & wife both have "authority" over each other's bodies, this means that your spouse has access to your body. Again, this gives support to the fact that you cannot deny your spouse physical intimacy.

But there is another practical implication & principle to be drawn from this verse. The fact that a married person's body belongs to their spouse implicitly demonstrates that their body is *for the other person*. Your body is not for you. If you are married, your body is to be used for the service of your spouse.

This really changes the way most people look at sex. The world says: sex is all about satisfying yourself. But that is not the Christian view. No, the Christian view says that your body is for your spouse. Paul writes in Philippians 2:3-4, "Do *nothing* from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind *regard one another as more important than yourselves*; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also *for the interests of others*." Paul says nothing should be done selfishly. And that includes sexual intimacy. In all areas of marriage, including the physical, *do not be selfish, but selfless*.

This "authority" that spouses that Paul speaks of in v.4 means that the other person has rightful access to the other's body. And additionally, this verse implicitly teaches that your body is for your spouse. Which means you should not just be seeking the pleasure for yourself, but the pleasure of the other person. And if you cultivate this openness & selflessness in your marriage, then you can know you are walking in the way God intended you to.

So, based on everything that Paul has said to this point in vs. 2-4, he gives a concluding summary statement at the start of v.5. In light of everything he has said, Paul says, therefore,

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“Stop depriving one another.” Because sexual desire & expression are a reason for marriage, marital intimacy is a Christian duty, and each spouse has access to the other, then married couples must stop depriving each other of this good gift.

Paul's summation of this topic is wrapped up in this simple command: “Do not deprive one another.” Again, Paul is saying that a husband/wife cannot withhold themselves from each other.

Now, this idea of “depriving” also implies that one spouse isn’t getting the access to and amount of sexual activity that they would desire. Therefore, as we think about marital intimacy, we should keep in mind what we could call the satisfaction principle. And the satisfaction principle is simply this: Married couples should have regular enough sexual intimacy that each spouse is content and satisfied.

With that said, each married couple is going to be different. Each person is different & each set of life circumstances are different. There is no one-size-fits-all answer. Instead, you just need to have honest communication with your spouse.

So, here are some general guidelines. If your spouse has a stronger desire than you do, out of love, be willing to yield to a higher frequency than you personally need. Conversely, if your spouse has less sexual desire than you do, out of love, be willing to sometimes yield to a lower frequency than you would personally prefer. In all of this, it is essential to maintain honest communication with your spouse. The target you should be aiming for is that, through effective communication and mutual consideration, you get to the point where each person is content and satisfied with the sexual aspect of the marriage. That is the goal.

But with that said, Paul does go on in v.5 to give a qualification to what he just said. He writes, “Stop depriving one another, *except* by agreement for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer.”

Here, Paul gives a couple of caveats on when/how it would be permissible to stop having regular intimacy. First, Paul says that if that is to happen, it has to be by consensual agreement. It can only happen “by agreement.” Meaning that both the husband & the wife are on the same page about it and agree. Second, Paul says that if it is to happen, it is only to be “for a time.” This means that it only takes place for a limited period of time. Sexual intimacy cannot be shut down indefinitely. It can only happen for a limited period. Third, Paul says that if it is to happen, it is to be done for a specific reason/purpose in which you are devoting yourself to prayer. There may be a time when you stop having regular intimacy b/c of a certain life event that has come up. Perhaps it is after a wife has given birth, or due to sickness or surgery, or a family crisis, or some other significant reason. And the idea is instead of setting aside intentional time for intimacy, you are to substitute that time with prayer for that certain life event.

But again, this is only to happen for a limited period of time. Paul continues in v.5 that a married couple must make sure to “come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.” This ties back into Paul’s early point back in v.2, that marriage is the one place where sexual desires can be expressed in a holy context. One of the good gifts of marriage is that it allows this outlet. So, if this outlet is cut off for too long, then Satan may use this as an

opportunity to lead a married person into temptation b/c their sexual desires are not being met. This is not to condone a lack of sexual self-control, but just an honest recognition that it is hard to maintain purity.

However, the second half of v.5 is just a qualification on Paul's part. Look at v.6. He writes: "But this I say by way of concession, not of command." I take this to mean that Paul is simply conceding that it is ok to have occasional periods of abstinence if it meets the conditions he laid in the second half of v.5. However, in v.6, Paul is saying that he is not commanding that married couples do this. It is ok to occasionally abstain for the above reasons, but he is not commanding married couples to do this. And that is b/c regular intimacy is to be the norm in marriage.

So, in vs.1-6, Paul has explained that both marriage & the marriage bed are good/holy gifts from the Lord. But, in the next verse, Paul also wants us to know that marriage isn't the only gift that God gives. In vs.1-6, we saw The Gift of Marriage, but in v.7, we will see The Gift of Singleness.

And just so you know, I will only really be able to introduce this topic of the gift of singleness today. We will be covering it more in-depth in the coming sermons. But please look at v.7 w/ me.

Paul writes, "Yet I wish that all men were even as I myself am. However, each man has his own gift from God, one in this manner, and another in that."

I. The Gift of Singleness (7:7)

While marriage is normative for most people, here the Apostle Paul makes a bold statement. He proclaims that even though marriage truly is a good gift from God, he wishes (as a single man) that "all people" were single like himself.

Here, Paul speaks of the gift of singleness. Now, I don't think he is speaking of the gift of singleness as being a spiritual gift in the more technical sense like teaching, mercy, or prophecy are. Rather, I think Paul is referring to singleness as a gift b/c of the unique blessings & benefits that the state of singleness brings. And Paul so loved & appreciated his state of singleness that he wished everybody else could experience the blessings & benefits that it brought.

Now, obviously, Paul knows that not everyone will be single like him. This is a hyperbolic statement. Obviously, this doesn't contradict all that he just said about the goodness of marriage in vs.2-5. It's like me saying, "I wish everyone could be in vocational ministry." Obviously, I know that not everybody can/will be, but I say that to demonstrate how I wish people could experience the blessings of vocational ministry that I have experienced. Paul is doing the same type of thing here.

Paul had personally experienced the goodness of singleness & he wanted others to as well. In 7:8, Paul when speaking to the unmarried & widows, says that "it is good" for them to remain as he was. Paul viewed his singleness as a good gift from God that brought unique blessings & benefits.

The fact is that there are multiple advantages that singleness affords. Look at 7:26. Paul says that he thinks that it is good “in view of the present distress” for individuals to remain single. See, single people have the ability to take more risks. Paul lived constantly on the go, on the move, in danger, facing persecution, on death’s doorstep for the sake of the Gospel. And in light of these various distresses, Paul recognizes that there were certain things about his pedal-to-the-metal Gospel lifestyle that only a single person could do. It’s similar to how the single missionary David Brainerd once wrote: “I cared not where or how I lived, or what hardships I went through; so that I could but gain souls to Christ.” So, singles have the benefits of being able to better endure through difficulties & risks.

Look also at 7:32-35. Here, Paul is saying that if you get married, an entire world of responsibilities, cares, & duties will be opened up to you. This is not to say these marital duties are bad. They are just a reality. And they take time and effort. So, if you are single, those marital duties don’t apply to you. So, Paul thinks singleness is profitable so that people may be able to “serve the Lord without distraction.” Simply put, marriage comes w/ distractions. And if you are single, you are not preoccupied with those things & therefore you have more freedom & flexibility to use for the good of others. You don’t have to: be home in the evenings, make dinner for an entire family every day, a spouse and/or children intentionally invest in & disciple, children to drive to music or sport practices, etc. The bottom line is that singles have a unique ability to serve the Lord & His kingdom.

Therefore, some Christians should contemplate committing themselves to singleness like Paul. In 7:7, Paul is saying he wishes people were like him. And God does call certain individuals to this very thing. The Lord Himself said this in Matthew 19:11-12: “Not all men can accept this statement, but only those to whom it has been given... [That] there are also eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. He who is able to accept this, let him accept it.” Jesus is saying that this message of a call to singleness for the sake of the kingdom will resonate with some people. To some, this call/desire has been given. Some will volitionally choose to remain single for the sake of kingdom work. Men & women like this will join the ranks of people like the Prophet Jeremiah, John the Baptist, and Apostle Paul. They will join the ranks of people in church history like Augustine, Amy Carmichael, Richard Sibbs, Rachel Saint, and David Brainerd. But not everyone is called to this. Jesus says only certain people will accept/receive/choose this. But some people the Lord uniquely calls/gifts to lifelong voluntary singleness/celebrity for the kingdom.

But, to be honest, I personally have not known of many who fit into this specific category of having this unique calling. Most in the church who are single are not so voluntarily, but providentially. They desire marriage, but they providentially just have not found a spouse yet.

And for those of you who are in this room, where that's you, I just want to say, I've been thinking a lot about you this week. I know that for some of you, your unwanted singleness is perhaps *the* greatest affliction that you currently have... It is your #1 trial...

What I am about to say won't take away the difficulty of your season, but I just want to encourage you with a couple of things. I want you to know that God is in control. Your God

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“works all things after the counsel of His will” (Ephesians 1:11). And your God causes “all things to work together for good to those who love God” & that good that He has for you is to conform you into the image of His Son (Romans 8:28-29). God is in control & He is using this season of your life to make you more like Jesus, which is your ultimate good.

If you desire marriage, it's good and ok to continue to pray for a godly spouse and to take steps in pursuit of that. However, I want you to know that your current state has come from the hand of God. God uses all things for the ultimate good, which is your sanctification for God's glory, and that includes your current singleness.

I want to draw our attention to the last part of 1 Corinthians 7:7. Paul says, “Each man has his own gift from God, one in this manner, and another in that.” I believe that what Paul is saying here is that each believer's marital status is a gift from God for them at that point. Some have the gift of marriage & enjoy the blessings/benefits that it affords. A husband & wife coming together as one flesh is a good gift from God. But others have the gift of singleness & enjoy the blessings/benefits that it affords. This status brings the blessing of the opportunity of more freedom, flexibility, increased risk-taking, and devotion in the service of the Lord & the kingdom of heaven. Singleness in its own way is also a good gift from God.

So, no matter where you are at, steward your state well. If you are married, steward your marriage well. If you are single, steward your singleness well.

And with all of that said, I want us to keep this thought in mind. The most important thing is not your marital status, but your relationship with Christ. None of this matters if you have not gotten this most important relationship right. Ultimately, marriage & singleness will be the state of all believers in Christ. For every person who has recognized their sinfulness before a holy God, repented of it, & placed their faith in the finished work of Christ for salvation, then marriage & singleness in their final state. Jesus says in Matthew 22:30 that “in the resurrection they neither marry, nor are given in marriage, but are as the angels of God in heaven.” So all will be single. Every marriage is only for this lifetime. But, through the Gospel, all partake in a spiritual marriage. The Church is the bridegroom of Christ. And one day, in the words of Revelation 19:7, all the saints of all the ages will come together and say: “Let us rejoice and be glad and give the glory to Him, for the marriage of the Lamb has come and His bride has made herself ready.”

So, praise God for His gifts of present marriage & singleness. But let us praise Him all the more for our future state of perfect singleness & spiritual marriage to Christ that awaits us in heaven...