

# Principles for marriage and singleness

## 1 Corinthians 7

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As we look at 1 Corinthians 7 we see teachings on marriage, sexual relations and singleness. If we read through the chapter with an open mind and teachable spirit, we can learn much from it, but an even greater understanding is available when we take the time to study the context.

At this time in history the Roman Empire had no set marriage procedures that the entire empire had to follow. Because of this, in Corinth many different practices and definitions of marriage were found.

One type of marriage could be translated as “tent companionship”. It was a sort of unofficial marriage relationship between slaves. While slaves might have had some input into the arrangement, it could be ended by the slave master at any time. If the owner chose to sell one of the slaves, the tent companionship relationship was finished. The slaves often had very little control over these types of relationships. Many in the church in Corinth were slaves. Some of them might have already been involved in multiple of these kinds of relationships before becoming Christians, and even now since they had become Christians. With this in mind, what should they do now?

Corinth also had what we might call “common law marriages”. If a man and a woman lived together as a married couple for a year, then they were considered married.

You also had “arranged marriages”. While different socio-economic classes may have used this method, many times “arranged marriages” were used by families who had very little money. They would sell their daughters in exchange for the dowry that they would receive from the family of the groom.

The fourth type of marriage was that used by the upper class. It included an official ceremony that included joining of their right hands saying vows. They prayed to Juno and to Jupiter. They had wreaths, flowers, veils, and even cake. They even exchanged rings. Sounds very familiar, doesn't it. Now you know where many of our traditions came from.

Even among these official marriages, we read in Roman literature that some had wives for cooking and housework and had concubines to fulfill their sexual desires. Also, remember that 1,000 temple prostitutes came down into the city each night and that Corinth was known throughout the Roman Empire for its extreme sexual immorality.

Within this context the divorce rate in Corinth was very high and the definition of marriage was a disaster. It was in the midst of all of this that these new believers in the church in Corinth, who had now been taught the standard of one husband/ one wife, for a lifetime, were asking their questions.

***<sup>1</sup> Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman."***

In 1 Corinthians 6:12-20, Paul had written about sexual immorality and how it had no place in the church. Yes, the Corinthians were surrounded by a sexed-crazed society, but God's people were to be holy and different in their dealings with sexuality.

In chapter 7, we see that while some in the Corinthian church had allowed sexual immorality to come inside the church, some had gone to the other extreme. They had gone to the extreme of calling all sex, sin. But that is not what the Bible says. We need to be careful not to make the same mistake.

We, too, see symbols of sex all around us. It is easy to see how a Christian could look at our society and fall into this trap of thinking that all sex is sinful, but that is not what we see when we look in the scriptures. Sex was created by God to be between a husband and a wife for a lifetime. It was God's plan from the beginning. It is sacred, precious, powerful, unifying and joyous.

Out of everything that God made, marriage between a husband and a wife is to be one of the clearest, most powerful, images that God gives us to understand our relationship with Him. A husband and wife come together and know each other more intimately than any other person in their lives. They are to share together all they have and all that they are. They come to know how the other thinks and feels. What the other desires and abhors. How the other struggles and succeeds. What they fear and what they live for. The husband and wife are to come to know each other deeply, emotionally, spiritually and finally physically through sexual relations, once they come together in marriage. Genesis 2:24 describes it with these words, ***"Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh."*** Paul refers to this complete oneness between a husband and wife and immediately declares the parallel in 1 Corinthians 6:17, ***"He who is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him."*** Just as a husband and wife become one flesh, so we with Christ become one in spirit once we put our faith in Him. The oneness between a husband and a wife is for this lifetime. Our oneness in spirit with Christ is for eternity.

God created marriage as a human symbol of His pursuit and His love for us. God has designed it so that only in marriage we find an unending, unconditional human love and a complete knowing of each other. This human oneness between a husband and a wife is to be for us a shadow of His love for us and our eternal relationship with Christ. So much so that in the book of James, when people turn from Christ, they are called adulterous.

Marriage was not created by man. Marriage was created in the mind of God before time began. God knew that out of our selfishness and depravity that we would rebel and turn against him. He knew that He would send His perfect son, Jesus Christ, as our Bridegroom to reclaim us as His Bride, for eternity. He created the imagery of marriage so that we would understand what we would find in Christ.

*Isaiah 54:5 says, "For your Maker is your husband, the Lord of hosts is his name; and the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer, the God of the whole earth he is called."*

*Isaiah 62:5 says, "As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you."*

*Ephesians 5:25 tells us, "Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church."*

Revelation 22:20 declares that, *"Believers in Jesus Christ are the bride of Christ, and we wait with great anticipation for the day when we will be united with our Bridegroom."*

This is why God has the right to define and instruct us on marriage and sexual relationships. He created them for His glory and our good. From this vantage point of God's authority over marriage, Paul is writing to the people of the church in Corinth.

As I mentioned before, some had brought sexual immorality into the church. In response, others had gone to the other extreme, declaring that all sex was sinful. Paul was now writing, showing once again that God's Word is sufficient to speak into every part of our lives. In the following verses, Paul gives very clear guidelines for Christians in regards to marriage, sexual relations and singleness. 1 Corinthians 7:2-5 says this,

*<sup>2</sup> But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. <sup>3</sup> The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. <sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> 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.*

If we only look at these verses, it seems that Paul has a very low view of marriage. It seems that marriage's only purpose is so we can avoid being drawn into sexual sin, but there is more here.

Paul is declaring God's standard of a lifelong exclusive marital relationship with one's spouse. One man. One woman. Each husband's total devotion to his one wife, and each wife's total devotion to her one husband, as long as they both shall live. No polygamy. No concubines. No sex outside of marriage.

The husband gives his wife the exclusive rights to have sexual relationships with him, and the woman gives the husband exclusive rights to have sexual relationships with her. Their bodies now belong to each other and are off limits to everyone else. Paul then goes on to say that the husband now has authority over his wife's body, and the wife now has authority over her husband's body. It was most common that only the husband took authority over his wife's body and decided and even demanded

when they would have sexual relations. Because of this, Paul's words of equality in regards to sexual relationships within marriage would have been a huge break from the norm.

If both are the authority, then what happens when both do not agree to have sexual relations? Maybe one is tired. One is stressed. The two had an argument. One feels sick. One feels rejected. One feels used. Several factors need to be considered. The two have become one. We are to die to self. We are to submit to one another out of reverence of Christ (Ephesians 5:21). We are to serve one another. The husband is to love the wife as Christ loved the church.

There will be times that we need to abstain for the sake of the other, because we love them and it is best for them. There will be other times that we need to share ourselves in sexual relationships for the love of the other, even when we don't really desire it. The standoff will only be broken as the husband and the wife both draw near to Christ. In Christ our needs are met in Him and our hearts are softened. In Christ we are grateful for all that we have been given. In Christ we desire to serve one another. In Christ we are secure and loved. In Christ we don't have to be so demanding or so contrary. In Christ we find the desire to love our spouse as we should. As we begin to love our spouse more fully, it lays the groundwork for greater intimacy in many areas of our marriages. As couples share in sexual relations, it will also begin to protect their marriage from temptation.

In verse 5 Paul wrote, ***"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."***

Paul is seeking to be practical. In their situation they were surrounded by sexual immorality. Prostitutes were even in the streets. At the same time the people in the church possessed natural sexual desires that could be easily awakened if not guarded rightly. In light of this, Paul instructed the married couples to not deprive each other of sexual relations with each other. These desires were given to be exercised between a husband and wife. If done regularly, in a God-honoring manner, natural sexual desires would be fulfilled in relations with their spouse, and temptation would decrease, and holiness would prevail.

In these verses Paul seems to reduce the reason for marriage to nothing more than fighting temptation, but we must step back and see what the Bible says. In Genesis 2:18, we see that marriage was created for companionship and partnership. In Malachi 2:15, we see that marriage is to produce godly offspring. In Ephesians 5:25, we see how marriage is the picture of the church's relationship with Christ. In Proverbs 5:15-20, we see how marriage and sexual relationships result in pleasure and purity. Marriage also serves to refine us and help us better understand how to love one another.

Some may challenge Paul's writing in regards to marriage since he was a single man, but we must take the following factors into consideration.

It is very likely that Paul had been married. He was a Rabbi and, by his own words, he was a Hebrew of Hebrews and as to righteousness under the law, blameless (Philippians 3:5-6). For Orthodox Jews marriage was obligatory. God had commanded all to be fruitful and multiply. Not to marry and not to have children was seen as breaking a commandment of God. Because of this, it is very unlikely that a

devout and pious Jew like Paul would have not been married. In Acts 26:10, we also read how Paul gave his vote against the Christians, which meant he must have been a member of the Sanhedrin which required that each member be married.

Scriptures do not tell us what might have happened to Paul's wife, but it is possible that she had died a premature death, or been a devout Jew and abandoned Paul after his conversion.

***<sup>6</sup> Now as a concession, not a command, I say this. <sup>7</sup> I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another. <sup>8</sup> To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single, as I am. <sup>9</sup> But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion.***

Paul prefers and recommends that all who can should remain single. All believers have been gifted by God. For those who can be single and fully devoted to Christ, they should do so. If they do not have the self-control that will be needed to be single and holy, then it will be better if they marry.

While many would consider marriage more desirable than being single, it is interesting to see that Paul sees it the other way around. Singles must remember that marriage was given as a shadow or a picture of the oneness that we have in Christ. A believer who is single may not have the spouse, the shadow, but in Christ they have the original, the oneness that truly matters for now and for eternity.

***<sup>10</sup> To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband <sup>11</sup> (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife.***

Paul then speaks to those who are married and in the faith. They should not divorce. The wife should not separate from the husband, nor the husband from the wife. In Christ we have every resource that is needed to make a marriage work. Marriage is difficult, but if the husband and wife are believers and will draw near to Christ, He will change their lives and in turn heal their marriage. If a believer is separated from their believing spouse, they should seek reconciliation. If not, they should remain unmarried, because in the eyes of God they are not free to remarry.

In certain cases the church family may even need to get involved and attempt to usher the unrepentant back towards repentance. If the unrepentant spouse chooses to remain in rebellion, abuse, adultery, abandonment or other blatant disregard for God's Word, they may in the end show themselves not to be a believer, in which these following verses may then apply:

***<sup>12</sup> To the rest I say (I, not the Lord) that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. <sup>13</sup> If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. <sup>14</sup> For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. <sup>15</sup> But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved.***

***God has called you to peace. <sup>16</sup> For how do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?***

Additional questions were being asked. It appears that some had become believers, but their spouses had not. Believers were not supposed to be yoked to unbelievers (2 Corinthians 6:14). What were they to do?

They were to continue with their unbelieving spouse, if their spouse would have them. The believer was now to be the sanctifying agent in the home. As they lived as salt and light, hopefully the result would be that others in the home would come to salvation. As we see in 1 Peter 3:1-2, ***“Likewise, wives, be subject to your own husbands, so that even if some do not obey the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives, when they see your respectful and pure conduct.”***

The other case Paul referred to was that of abandonment. If one became a believer, lived as unto Christ in the home, and still the unbelieving spouse chose to leave the marriage, the believer was free to remarry. This is the second exception for divorce that we see in scripture, the first being adultery found in Jesus’ words in Matthew 5 and Matthew 19.

***<sup>17</sup> Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him. This is my rule in all the churches. <sup>18</sup> Was anyone at the time of his call already circumcised? Let him not seek to remove the marks of circumcision. Was anyone at the time of his call uncircumcised? Let him not seek circumcision. <sup>19</sup> For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God. <sup>20</sup> Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called. <sup>21</sup> Were you a bondservant when called? Do not be concerned about it. (But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity.) <sup>22</sup> For he who was called in the Lord as a bondservant is a freedman of the Lord. Likewise he who was free when called is a bondservant of Christ. <sup>23</sup> You were bought with a price; do not become bondservants of men. <sup>24</sup> So, brothers, in whatever condition each was called, there let him remain with God.***

As believers we are called to live out our faith in whatever condition that we find ourselves. Be content in Christ. Be faithful. Whether rich or poor, slave or free, married or single, educated or not educated, serve Christ with all of your heart, walking in his ways, prepared to be used by God in your setting. This is our call and our purpose.

***<sup>27</sup> Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife. <sup>28</sup> But if you do marry, you have not sinned, and if a betrothed woman marries, she has not sinned. Yet those who marry will have worldly troubles, and I would spare you that.***

***<sup>32</sup> I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord. <sup>33</sup> But the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife, <sup>34</sup> and his interests are divided. And the unmarried or betrothed woman is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit. But the married woman is anxious about worldly things, how to please her husband. <sup>35</sup> I say this for your own***

***benefit, not to lay any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord.***

Paul speaks here primarily to the unmarried. To marry is a blessing, but it will divide your devotions. While you may still love God, you will now have many other responsibilities to attend to. If you are single, pursue God with an undivided devotion. Your time is yours. Your money is yours. Your life is yours. So serve Christ completely with all that you are. There are many devoted married people in the church, but none of them are free to serve Christ as the unmarried can.

If you now find yourself unmarried, don't miss a day thinking on what you don't have. Serve the kingdom of God in ways that only you can. Volunteer. Live by extreme faith. Take risks. Sacrifice. And serve as your freedom allows for the glory of God.

***<sup>39</sup>A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord.<sup>40</sup> Yet in my judgment she is happier if she remains as she is. And I think that I too have the Spirit of God.***

In this message we have seen how sexual relationships within marriage can serve as a protection against temptation, but we must understand this in the context of the gospel. It is only in Christ that we are forgiven of our past, present and future sins. It is only in Christ that we find victory over temptation. It is only in Christ that our desires are made new. It is only in Christ that our hearts long for holiness and our desire for God becomes stronger than all other desires. It is only in Christ that we find contentment, regardless in what situation we find ourselves.

So today, whether single or married, trust in Jesus Christ, delight yourself in God and watch Him transform the desires of your hearts.

### **Discussion questions:**

1. What themes or ideas from these scriptures did you find most interesting?
2. What are ways that you think our society is thinking incorrectly about marriage and sexual relationships?
3. How is marriage a shadow of our oneness with Christ?
4. The Christian husband is to love his wife as Christ loved the church. In what ways did Christ love the church?
5. How might a believer be a witness to their unbelieving spouse?
6. Our desires are made more holy as we delight ourselves in God. How might we nurture our delight in God this week?
7. What from this study do you think God wants you to remember? How might you apply it this week?

## Extra

Sex is a glorious, holy invention of God. Because of this we must initiate the conversation with our children. There are so many lying voices crying out about what sex is and what it is for. We, as Christian parents, cannot go silent on the subject. We must speak God's joyous perspective of sex and warn our children of the lies that they will hear. Don't be fooled. Our children will learn about sex one way or another. We either direct the conversation or we will lose it. Men, sit down with your sons and let them know that you are familiar with their struggles. Talk about temptation and purity. Walk along with them and show them the ways of God and manhood. Mothers, sit down with your daughters and explain temptation, modesty, love, beauty and purity. As we lead the conversation our children will grow in their trust of God and mature into spiritual men and women.