

Paul has been addressing some of the problems in the church of Corinth. In the previous passage he dealt with sexual immorality. In today's passage he continues the subject as it relates to marriage and clarifies for us God's boundaries for healthy marriages.

¹ Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman." 1 Corinthians 7:1-16 Apparently the church of Corinth had written to ask about abstinence. They had used a phrase, "touch a woman" which was a Greek idiom for having sexual relations. Prostitution was an accepted norm in the city. That made it difficult for new believers to give it up. Greeks believed that it was impossible to be sexually satisfied within the bounds of marriage. Thus, Corinth was a cesspool of sexual indulgence. The church seems to have decided the best way to avoid temptation was to abstain from sex altogether. They thought all believers should remain abstinent to stay pure.

Our culture has become like that of Corinth. It is no wonder, for we are taught that we are just a form of animal life, so why shouldn't we behave like animals (at least the non-monogamous ones). The idea ignores the soul and dehumanizes us! Some people in the church in Corinth had gone to the other extreme. "Never have sex! The body is evil." But that can't be true for God made our bodies and said of all He created that it was very good (Genesis 1:31ⁱ). Paul was writing to give balance to their mindset toward sex. *"Biblical sexuality is the only view of sexuality that can properly account for the body and the soul."*ⁱⁱⁱ

² But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. ³ The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. 1 Corinthians 7:2,3 The Bible tells us of Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve. And God said the *two* shall be one. He did not say three or four or more. The patriarchs show us how messy bigamy can be.

Marriage is a picture of Christ and the church (Ephesians 5:25ⁱⁱⁱ). Marriage is among those good things God created. We were designed to find our other half with all their differences which make us whole. It is often frustrating as we learn to give and take and to honor the other person above ourselves (Philippians 2:3^{iv}). But it is also a tool that God uses to mature us. It is a blessing to share life intimately with another. A spouse should become your closest friend.

God designed marriage. It is a sacred union between a man and a woman. When our city decided to pass their LGBTQ ordinance, they also decided to try to do away with religious freedom. At the city meeting before the vote, I reminded the council that that almost every major religion saw the union of one man and one woman as sacred. I asked for an exemption for churches to maintain freedom of religion. I was ignored and was told that if we offered to officiate a wedding, we had to do so for anyone who asked. Most of the evangelical churches decided they could no longer perform weddings. But it went further. They said we could no longer allow our building to be used by other organizations unless we offered the same to any group. I asked mayor if she meant that if Satanists wanted to slaughter a chicken in worship of the devil, I had to allow it. She responded that the Supreme Court had decided. Strangely enough, the city called about six months later wanting to use Jordan Hall. I had to remind them of the stance they had

taken. They apologized for asking. If you take down God's boundaries, where does it end? With their reasoning, how can they say bigamy or pedophilia is wrong? The church must uphold the sacred union of marriage according to God's design.

Paul tells us **one reason to be married is to avoid sexual immorality**. Instead of abstinence, for most people, the answer is marriage. Sexual intimacy bonds a couple together when it is with love and the needs of one another in mind. That is why in verse three and four Paul explains that you have a right over your spouse's body but he or she has a right over yours as well. Your body belongs to your spouse. That is picture of Christ owning your body, for you are His bride. The verse just before our passage for today reminds us that we were bought with a price and should therefore glorify God with our bodies (1 Corinthians 6:20^v).

⁴ 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. 1 Corinthians 7:4 This is God's plan and Jesus affirmed it in Mark 10:6-9.^{vi} There is balance in serving one another in love, even sacrificially (Ephesians 5:21^{vii}). This equality in the bedroom was quite different from the Roman culture where the husband had his way. For those ascetics in the church, this quite a reversal, for Paul is saying that sexual passions within marriage are normal and healthy part of marriage and a way to serve one another in love. Regular sexual relationship helps each spouse to avoid temptation and thereby helps them in their service to the Lord. That means God is pleased that we follow His design in His way, which is the way of love (1 Corinthians 14:1^{viii}). That is very different from being given over to lust (Hebrews 13:4^{ix}).

Lust is going after the body. Love is going after the person. *If an individual is passionate about someone just for her body, that means he doesn't love that person—he just wants the body. The Bible shows that sex is a beautiful gift given to humanity by God to be enjoyed as a blessing within the context of a faithful, monogamous marriage relationship between a husband and a wife.*^x

⁵ 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. 1 Corinthians 7:5 A married couple can abstain from intimacy but only if both agree and the purpose is to be devoted to prayer for a time. After that time is over, they are to resume sexual relations to avoid temptation.

The gift of sex within the boundary of marriage is a foreshadow of our prayer intimacy with Jesus. That is why you can set aside the shadow for a time to focus on the reality. It is pure and undefiled giving of ourselves to Jesus as He gives Himself to us. (Ephesians 5:31,32^{xi}; Song of Songs 1:2-4^{xii}; Isaiah 54:5^{xiii}) The seed we receive in our communion with Jesus is the living and enduring Word of God. Notice how it is contrasted with perishable seed in 1 Peter 1:23. ²³ *since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God;* Let the Spirit speak the Word to you when you pray. Pray as you read the Word.

It is fascinating to me that when Muslims see dreams or visions of Jesus, they usually report that what He spoke to them they later found out was from Scripture. Often it is John 14:6^{xiv}. One Iranian woman miraculously saved from a suicide attempt said Jesus appeared to her and quoted what she later found out was all of Psalm 91. The seed of the Word in a heart that is receptive brings new life in us.

Paul warns that to not keep regular sexual relations can give Satan a chance to tempt us. The natural desire in us is ignored when one partner refuses to have sexual relations, and if that goes on for a long time, his or her partner will be tempted to look elsewhere for that intimacy. You are harming yourself when you punish your spouse by withdrawing from intimacy, and this gives Satan an opportunity to destroy the marriage. If there are physical reasons, see a doctor. If it is emotional, you may need to see a counselor, but in either case be open and honest with each other and pray about the situation together.

⁶ Now as a concession, not a command, I say this.⁷ 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. 1

Corinthians 7:6,7 Not all people have the gift of abstinence and being single. Most would find the single life too tempting. Men seem to struggle with this more than women, however, both sexes have a God given desire to be with a partner of the opposite sex. That need is unexplainable because we have such differences that we are required to constantly compromise our desires. **Marriage can only be all that it should be when we find our satisfaction in Christ.** Some people like the Apostle Paul have the gift of a much diminished desire, or they are so passionate about the Lord and ministry that they don't find time for a relationship.

Paul was so dedicated to his calling that caring for a spouse would become a distraction. John Wesley had that kind of dedication, and his marriage suffered for it. I met one man who led a church movement and had a full-time job. The triple commitment meant his wife and children all paid the price. Discipling one's own children should be the priority of an elder. The good behavior of his children is one requirement for eldership (1 Timothy 3:4^{xv}). The Law teaches us in the Shema to continually teach our children (Deuteronomy 6:7^{xvi}). If you are passionate about ministry and not distracted from it by desires for marriage, then don't marry. That is a great calling and gift.

To become a rabbi in the first century you were required to be married. Elders are to be the husband of one wife (Titus 1:6^{xvii}). Again, we see one man and one woman. Some translators say this means a one-woman kind of man. In other words, he is not flirtatious. To counsel married couples one needs to understand what they experience. So singleness must be a gift for evangelism or other ministries besides being an elder, though Paul certainly had a shepherd's heart and addressed marriage here and in a previous letter. The catholic church has tried celibacy and it turned into a nightmare of abuse. To try to remain single without having the gift can be dangerous.

⁸ 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. 1

Corinthians 7:8,9 I believe it is easier for widows to remain single than it is for a surviving male spouse to do so. The widow can be devoted to the Lord if she is able to exercise self-control. If one is unable to resist thoughts and urges, stated as "burn with passion," then it is better to marry.

¹⁰ To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband ¹¹ (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife. 1 Corinthians 7:10,11 The Lord hates divorce (Malachi 2:16^{xviii}). Marriage is a picture of Jesus and the church. Divorce ruins that image and sends the wrong message. If you must separate, then remain unmarried or be reconciled. Paul tells us this is the Lord's command, not

merely his suggestion. That gives us a strong motivation to work things out. I always tell people that you can't change your spouse, but you can change your expectations and demands. You can die to yourself and be gracious considering the grace we have received.

God works through marriage to teach us to be more like Him. **The only way a marriage can be all it is meant to be is for each partner to be selfless.** And the only way to be selfless is the cross. Our present culture is "me-centered." That is what makes marriage impossible. We look for the perfect spouse who we think will meet *our* needs. He or she does not exist. Sorry ladies, Prince Charming is a fantasy. The only perfect husband is Jesus. Sorry men, there isn't a woman on the planet who wants to live solely for you and your desires. Marriage is self-sacrifice for each other or it is doomed. You can't meet in the middle, a 50/50 arrangement, and each make demands of the other. Marriage is 100/100. Each needs to give their all to the other if it is to last.

If you think that you give your all but that your spouse doesn't, congratulations, you are like Jesus to the church. Keep it up and he or she will slowly be changed by your faithful love (1 Peter 3:1,2^{xix}). If he or she does not change, remember Jesus keeps on loving even when we are unfaithful (2 Timothy 2:13^{xx}). Remember Hosea and Gomer. I doubt anyone has it that tough.

Only when we see that Jesus is our greatest need and the source of our satisfaction, can we be realistic in our expectations of our spouse. Marriage can be beautiful and fulfilling, but not when we seek it to be that for our-self, but rather when we seek for it to be that for our spouse, because our needs are met in Jesus.

There are cases of physical or emotional abuse where counselling is needed. We adopt many of the patterns we saw in our parents. Scars from the past can be expressed in unhealthy ways. The Word of God can correct all that, but sometimes a good Christian counselor is needed to give you the tools to help in the process of change.

¹² 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. ¹³ If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. ¹⁴ 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. 1 Corinthians 7:12-14 Paul has no Scripture to back his opinion on this matter, but he must believe the suggestion is from the Holy Spirit. Do not leave an unbelieving spouse. They may come to Christ through your influence.

This cannot be saying that the spouse is saved. I say that because verse 16 asks, "How do you know whether you will save your spouse?" That implies they are not saved but may become saved through your witness to them.

So, if one is saved and the other considered holy while in the relationship with the Christian, Paul implies that the children of a Christian are set apart for God: "holy". We should claim this for our children! Again, that does not mean they are saved, but rather that God looks upon them as those considered to be set apart for God. They are saved when they come to a personal decision to accept the forgiveness of their sins made possible by the sacrifice of Jesus in our place on the cross (Ephesians 1:7^{xxi}).

¹⁵ 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. 1 Corinthians 7:15 "Not enslaved" means free to marry again - not bound to the unbelieving spouse. Instead of living in the

turmoil of demanding they stay when they don't want to, let them depart. They may find the Lord and return. I have seen that happen. The woman thought there was someone better out in the world but ended up realizing how good she had it. However, by the time she wanted to return it was too late as her spouse had moved on and remarried. I have also seen an unbelieving man return in time to his believing spouse. The wife is still trusting God for his salvation. The emphasis in these verses is not our freedom to remarry, but the hope of the salvation of the unbelieving spouse.

The world looks at marriage in a very selfish manner: The woman wants a man to support her and give her children. The man looks at marriage as a way for a woman to meet his sexual desires and care for the home. Each wants the other to serve them instead of desiring to serve like Jesus continually serves us (Matthew 20:28^{xxii}).

The design of God for marriage is that the man provides the loving care, protection, and provision that the wife longs for and the woman provides the respect and assistance the man longs for. Those God given desires, as opposed to the desires of the fallen nature, see the spouse as a gift from God to be appreciated and valued. It is to be seen as a way to learn about our relationship with God. I often find that when I am failing to be the spouse I need to be, it is because I am not reflecting the relationship I should be having with Jesus. My ego has gotten in the way. I am not expressing the grace that God is continually expressing toward me (Ephesians 2:4,5^{xxiii}).

It all comes back to our relationship with the Lord. If I complain about my spouse to God like Adam did (Genesis 3:12^{xxiv}), I am just showing the same ingratitude he showed. Remember, he had the perfect wife and he still complained.

¹⁶ For how do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife? 1 Corinthians 7:16 Here is the reason one should remain with an unbelieving spouse. The Christian's godliness in words and actions should draw the spouse to the Lord. Unfortunately, I have too often seen the Christian spouse misrepresenting Christ and being quite different from 1 Peter 3:4. *⁴ but let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God's sight is very precious.* A contentious and demanding spirit not only drives the spouse away from you but from Jesus as well. Part of the curse from the fall was that the woman's desire would be rule over her husband (Genesis 3:16^{xxv}). The husband is called to lead and craves respect. The woman longs for love and wants to have her way. The resulting clash is reflected in the high rate of divorce. Christians, however, should serve one another in love (Galatians 5:13^{xxvi}). They should recognize the other's need, the woman's need for love, and the man's need for respect (Ephesians 5:33^{xxvii}). But sadly, our divorce rate is barely below that of the culture around us.

The exception to this rule of lifelong commitment is unfaithfulness, death, or an unbelieving spouse who wishes to depart. Marriage is a covenant relationship. If one partner is unfaithful to the other, then they have broken that covenant (Matthew 5:32^{xxviii}; 19:9^{xxix}). There is always hope for restoration if there is genuine repentance. The spouse is free to remarry if the covenant is broken, their spouse has died, or the unbelieving spouse wishes to depart.

What Paul has presented is the value of marriage and the value of singleness. Both have their place and are gifts from God to be used for His glory. We are challenged by the Scriptures to see that our marriages represent Christ and the church. Our intimacy

with Christ should be reflected in our marriage. Married or single, let us live for the glory of the One who purchased us with His own blood!

Questions:

- 1 What is the first reason Paul gives for marriage?
- 2 To whom does our body belong? (2 part answer)
- 3 What is the difference between lust and love?
- 4 What is the seed by which we are born-again?
- 5 When is abstinence appropriate?
- 6 What makes marriage impossible?
- 7 What makes marriage work?
- 8 Under what conditions did Paul allow for divorce?
- 9 What is God's design for marriage?
- 10 What is the reason to remain with an unbelieving spouse?

ⁱ **Genesis 1:31 (ESV)**

³¹ And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

ⁱⁱ Um Steven, *Preaching the Word - 1 Corinthians: The Word of the Cross*.

ⁱⁱⁱ **Ephesians 5:25 (ESV)**

²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her,

^{iv} **Philippians 2:3 (ESV)**

³ Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.

^v **1 Corinthians 6:20** for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body. ^v

^{vi} **Mark 10:6-9 (ESV)**

⁶ But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.'

⁷ 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife,

⁸ and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two but one flesh.

⁹ What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate."

^{vii} **Ephesians 5:21 (ESV)**

²¹ submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.

^{viii} **1 Corinthians 14:1 (NIV)**

¹ Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy.

^{ix} **Hebrews 13:4 (ESV)**

⁴ Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous.

^x Um, Steven, *Preaching the Word - 1 Corinthians: The Word of the Cross*, quoting C.S. Lewis *The Four Loves*

^{xi} **Ephesians 5:31-32 (NIV)**

³¹ "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh."

³² This is a profound mystery--but I am talking about Christ and the church.

^{xii} **Song of Songs 1:2-4a (NIV)**

² Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth-- for your love is more delightful than wine. ³ Pleasing is the fragrance of your perfumes; your name is like perfume poured out. No wonder the maidens love you!

^{4a} Take me away with you--let us hurry! Let the king bring me into his chambers.

^{xiii} **Isaiah 54:4-5 (ESV)**

⁴ "Fear not, for you will not be ashamed; be not confounded, for you will not be disgraced; for you will forget the shame of your youth, and the reproach of your widowhood you will remember no more. ⁵ 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.

^{xiv} **John 14:6 (ESV)**

⁶ Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

^{xv} **1 Timothy 3:4 (ESV)**

⁴ He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive,

^{xvi} **Deuteronomy 6:7 (ESV)**

⁷ You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.

^{xvii} **Titus 1:6 (ESV)**

⁶ if anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination.

^{xviii} **Malachi 2:16 (NIV)**

¹⁶ "I hate divorce," says the LORD God of Israel, "and I hate a man's covering himself with violence as well as with his garment," says the LORD Almighty. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith.

^{xix} **1 Peter 3:1-2 (ESV)**

¹ 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, ² when they see your respectful and pure conduct.

^{xx} **2 Timothy 2:13 (ESV)**

¹³ if we are faithless, he remains faithful— for he cannot deny himself.

^{xxi} **Ephesians 1:7 (NIV)**

⁷ In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace

^{xxii} **Matthew 20:28 (ESV)**

²⁸ even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

^{xxiii} **Ephesians 2:4-5 (ESV)**

⁴ But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us,

⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—

^{xxiv} **Genesis 3:12 (ESV)**

¹² The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate."

^{xxv} **Genesis 3:16 (ESV)**

¹⁶ To the woman he said, "I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children. Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you."

^{xxvi} **Galatians 5:13 (ESV)**

¹³ For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.

^{xxvii} **Ephesians 5:33 (ESV)**

³³ However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.

^{xxviii} **Matthew 5:32 (ESV)**

³² But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

^{xxix} **Matthew 19:9 (ESV)**

⁹ And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery."