

God's Good Gift of Marriage (1 Cor 7:1-17)

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Preacher: Michael Drake

[0 : 00] It's continuing in 1 Corinthians 7, and starting from verse 1.

Now, for the matters you wrote about, it is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman. But, since sexual immorality is occurring, each man should have sexual relations with his own wife, and each woman with her own husband.

The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. The wife does not have authority over her own body, but yields it to her husband.

In the same way, the husband does not have authority over his own body, but yields it to his wife. Do not deprive each other, except perhaps by mutual consent, and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer.

Then come together again, so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. I say this as a concession, not as a command. I wish that all of you were as I am, but each of you has your own gift from God.

[1 : 18] One has this gift, the other has that. Now, to the unmarried and the widows, I say, it is good for them to stay unmarried, as I do.

But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion. To the married, I give this command, not I, but the Lord.

A wife must not separate from her husband. But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife.

To the rest, I say this, I, not the Lord. If any brother has a wife who is not a believer, and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her.

And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer, and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband.

[2 : 25] Otherwise, your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. But if the unbeliever leaves, let it be so. The brother or the sister is not bound in such circumstances.

God has called us to live in peace. How do you know, wife, whether you'll save your husband? Or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife? Nevertheless, each person should live as a believer in whatever situation the Lord has assigned to them, just as God has called them.

This is the rule I lay down in all the churches. This is the word of the Lord. Amen. That one?

That sounds it. Is that better? Good. Thank you. It is good to be here. Although I've been asked to preach on one of the most difficult chapters in the New Testament.

Thank you, Pastor William. Seriously, though, this is what, about the third in five Sundays that you've looked at the issue of sexual morality and sexuality in one form or another.

[3 : 51] And by now you must be getting to understand that for Paul, it was not a matter of shame. It was a matter of glorious gift of God. Sex is something beautiful, given by God for a purpose.

But the sexual immorality that surrounded him in Corinth and surrounds us can make it something we just are afraid to talk about and deal with.

So we're going to pray now, and we're going to ask God to give us a real understanding, not simply of the passage, but a love for the holiness and the beauty with which God has made us in his image and called us to live.

Shall we pray? Our Father in heaven, as we bow before you, we thank you that we come before a God who is wise and glorious, a holy God, and we worship and we ask that, Lord, you would come into our midst today.

Tune our hearts to your word and your spirit. Conform our lives to the very image of your living son. And may this church and the people of God in this city and in this land walk faithfully before you in a purity that shatters the myths and self-centeredness of the world around us.

[5 : 18] And we ask that in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Yes.

It's working. So Paul is talking about the good gift of marriage. But he doesn't go into marriage in the way we would expect.

He has a context. And the context is your memory verse. You were bought with a price.

Therefore, honour God with your bodies. That is the context in which he comes into this subject. But still, he doesn't even then go straight into the issue of marriage.

Instead, he says, now you guys have written to me before I got here with a question. And this is one of the first of the difficult passages or verses in this passage that we have to look at.

[6 : 17] Because different translations have it in different ways. Some of them will say, it is good for a man not to marry. And in that translation, it almost looks as if Paul is saying, oh, marriage is off.

Thankfully, it's not. But what's happening here? Paul is saying, you wrote to me about this statement that was in going around the church.

Some of you are saying it's not good to have sex. And as we go through the passage, you'll even see that he thinks some of them are even saying it's not good to have sex in marriage.

And you're saying, what's going on here? And so Paul is saying, this is the topic before us. Some of you think it's not good for a man to have sexual relations. Some versions will say for a man not to touch a woman.

Well, we know in today's context that that amounts to sexual harassment. We know what he's talking about, don't we? It is not good. No, says Paul. That's the question.

[7 : 25] Let me answer it. And he answers it with seven very important little points. And I want us to move through these fairly quickly.

I want you to have your Bibles open if you can. I want you to follow it. And I want you afterwards to go home and read it and talk about it. And if you've got no one at home to talk about it, bring it back to youth group or whatever during the week.

Talk about it. Pray about it. Come to understand what God is saying. And the first thing comes up in verse 2. He says that marriage is exclusive. Now look at what he's saying.

Since sexual immorality is occurring, each man should have sexual relations with his own wife and each woman with her own husband. Now at first glance, this might seem to be, Paul is saying, look, to make sure you're not acting in an immoral way like everyone around you, go and get married.

Now you single women, just, I want you to imagine for a minute one of the really handsome guys here, there are some, one of the really handsome single guys comes up to you and he says, now listen, I've got a problem.

[8 : 35] I'm just lost in the immorality of this world. Will you marry me so that I can be kept from immorality? And the answer you are going to give, I hope, is not in any way.

It's the wrong approach, isn't it? What Paul is saying is something quite different. He's saying, listen, you men, and by parallel, you women, have one partner in mind.

That is how you are going to be holy. And look, it's pretty simple. You can see that I'm an old man. Oh, well, maybe you can't see I'm an old, I am an old man.

But I'm a man. I still, I still face temptation in the sexual area. How do I deal with it? Well, one of the ways I'm privileged to deal with it is the moment something is in front of me to tempt me, I put between it and me an image of my beautiful wife.

Now, I'm sorry, none of you other guys will be able to do that because there is not a woman on the earth that will compare with my Priscilla. Not even the woman in Proverbs 31. But seriously, that's what Paul has in mind.

[9 : 50] Yes, you can take it a step further and you can put a picture of Christ there and say, yes, that's whom I'm serving. But in the first instance, the fact that I have this wife, this wonderful woman given to me by God simply stops the temptation in its tracks.

And I'm so thankful for that. So, marriage is exclusive. But secondly, it's about giving. Look at verse 3. The husband should fulfil his marital duty to his wife.

Whoops. Marital duty? So, sexual relations with a wife are just a duty? Right? You tick it off as you go through the week.

Mortgage paid. Meals bought. Oh, my wife. No. No, you see, he's calling it a duty because it is what you are in marriage partly for.

It belongs there. It's what should be happening. But notice what he's saying. He's not saying, husband, demand your right. He's saying, husband, give to your wife.

[10 : 56] And he's saying to the wives, give to your husbands. This is what you owe him. You know, so many marriages are about taking. Right?

Men take what they want and expect their wives to give in. That is simply abuse and it has no place in the Christian life.

And in this liberated day, women, you can do the same. You can be demanding. You can say, I want and I will have. And Paul says, no.

You are there to give. And then thirdly, when we look at the next verse, verse 4, it's very personal. Look at what he says.

The wife does not have authority over her own body but yields to her husband in the same way the husband does not have authority over his own body but yields to his wife.

[11 : 54] This is personal. This is not just sex to fulfill a drive. This is not just companionship because that's what you do. This is the husband yielding to his wife.

And we're going to come back to that in a minute. But it's personal. It's that woman. That woman God has given me. It's that man God has given me. This is the personal relationship that God has called me to and this is one way in which he has determined it will be built up.

And then we turn to verses 5 and 6. Now, this might seem strange to you that a couple might want to abstain from sex. I think Paul thinks that and perhaps he was right that verse 1 was even applying in marriage.

That there was this teaching that to be really holy you don't have sexual relations even in marriage. And Paul says no. There may be a good reason for giving up on it for a period so you can pray and you do it by mutual consent.

The two of you agree that we'll do this for a time. But it's for a time. And then you come back together. But you notice what he's saying behind all this. You are in control of it. No man or woman ever has the right to say oh, it was just the drive was too great.

[13 : 22] The desire too strong. The impulse too forceful. Paul is saying you are completely in control of this. Control it and use it in a way that cares for your spouse and glorifies God.

Oh, and then he drops in those verses about singleness. Oh, by the way, you married, I wish you were all like me, single. What? What's he doing here?

Oh, but then he finishes, well, no, actually, it's quite a good idea that you get married. Well, I've got news for you. Pastor William's going to deal with that in the next section.

But just notice what he is saying. He's saying you don't all have the same gift. In other words, marriage is a gift. It's something God has given you if you're married.

And if you're not married, that too is a gift. I have a, a grandson, I've got several grandsons, but one of my grandsons is noted for saying there is no way he's going to get married.

[14 : 32] It's so gross. I don't think he means just the Sikhs. I think he just means being snuggled up to someone else. You might have guessed he hasn't quite reached adolescence yet.

It's going to change. But at the moment his gift is singleness. And the reality is for almost, I would say for almost everyone in this room who have spent more of your life single than you have married, it is something God calls people to.

You weren't born married, you were born with a gift of singleness. And for that you ought to be very thankful. Imagine it. Born into marriage. No, you've been born, God has given a gift of singleness.

And I have four children, three of them wonderfully and blessedly married, one of them wonderfully and blessedly single. Now I don't know whether that will be permanent, but that is her gift.

and that's where she is able to serve God and honour him. And Paul says, look, the married people, they could all worry about their wives and that. You know, my wife Priscilla was offered with some friends and, you know, I'm tempted to pull out the phone now and check whether she's got home or not.

[16 : 00] We're concerned about each other. We should be. That's not wrong. But Paul says, listen, a single person has given that opportunity to devote her or his entire life to God.

Okay. And then verses 10 to 11. Divorce is out of place. Now this is not all of the Bible's teaching on divorce.

And I'm not even going to cover the various aspects of it tonight. But what I am going to say to you is this. Paul is stressing the fact that if you're married you should remain married, if at all possible.

And he says, if a woman does desert her husband or leave her husband, and there can be times when in a situation of abuse or, as he mentions shortly, with an unbeliever, it may be, then that is a condition that you expect to stay in.

Right? Basically, marriage is for life. Now what is it these days? Marriage is for as long as you love somebody. Right?

- [17 : 10] Somebody gets up one day and says, oh, I don't love her anymore, I'm off. Or, even worse, we're not compatible. What does God say to husbands?
- He tells them to love your wife. You don't love your wife? Well then stop not loving her and get on a lover. It's simple. Right? You don't think you're compatible?
- Who cares? You're married. Get on with it. This is a lifelong commitment and Paul is absolutely rock solid on that. And then he finishes up with this idea that it's sanctifying.
- Yes, in some marriages, a husband or a wife might be an unbeliever. Now that may be because one of the couple has been converted while they've been married or it may have been foolishly the believer's got married an unbeliever or whatever.
- He's not worried about how you got there. He's saying what is your marriage like now? And your marriage now is sanctified if you are living it for God.
- [18 : 19] Your husband, your wife may not be a believer it makes no difference. He uses children as an example. The children are holy.
- Right? They're not illegitimate. Just because the marriage is not one that involves Christians it doesn't mean the children are illegitimate. No. The whole marriage is set aside in the service of God.
- It's sanctified. Marriage is something that draws us closer and closer not just to each other. but to God himself. It's part of our service, our worship, our life in Christ.
- Those are the seven things that I think are there in that passage. But I want to take you now to something else.
- Paul says that marriage is a profound mystery. I have to say yes. Priscilla and I are heading for our 47th wedding anniversary.
- [19 : 26] That means that we've been married for longer, twice as long as lots of you have lived. And every moment of that gets better. Now, we stumble occasionally, actually, more than occasionally, never mind, we won't go there.
- But really, it's a magnificent demonstration of the grace of God that after 47 years, I just want more of it. And I think she does too. Of course we do.
- So, what's Paul saying? He's saying it's a profound mystery. A man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife and the two will become one flesh.
- That's the mystery. When he says one flesh, remember what he said about a man who lies with a prostitute? He says, you've become one flesh. He's not talking just about the physical union.
- He's saying there's something about the way God has created sex and sexual union that means you start to become one. And how can you possibly do that with somebody that you're not committed to for the rest of your life?
- [20 : 40] No, says Paul, this is the mystery. That in marriage, two people become one. Priscilla and I, over the last few months, have had to take some time out and rest.
- In fact, it was so serious that we had a lockdown, just the two of us, with the rest of the world going on outside as usual, and we were in there.
- And yet, the wonderful thing was, it was actually good to be together. It was a blessed time for us. It's a mystery.
- I don't know how that works. 47 years and I still haven't worked it out. But I do love it. But you know, Paul isn't actually talking about that. He's saying it's a profound mystery, but I'm talking about Christ and the church.
- What? What's he mean? Well, if you can flick over to Ephesians chapter 5.
- [21 : 59] I got this all confused. I had it all set up. We'll get there. No, I'll skip it.

I'll just recall it. As you go through Ephesians chapter 5, you will see that Paul there talks about marriage as the image of Christ loving the church.

And he says to husbands, I've mentioned it already, love your wives. How? As Christ loved the church, and gave himself for it, that he might present it a holy and glorious bride.

That's what Christ is doing to us. He died for us. He laid down his life for us, that we might be presented one day in the perfection as his bride at that wonderful consummation of this age.

Husbands, you are to love your wife and lay down your life so that she might be built up in the glorious image of the perfect woman serving Christ.

[23 : 17] On wives, he's got you nailed too. You are to love and reverence your husbands to such an extent that they too show the glory and wonder of Christ.

Now in reality it doesn't often cost us our lives. The reality is it just costs us what we want to do at the moment. I used to work and I'd come home to a wife and a house full of little kids and she would be absolutely exhausted and I would want to sit down and read the newspaper.

My time out. I had to stop. I had to train myself to pick up time with those kids and give Priscilla a break.

Such a sacrifice. Seriously, what is more important to you than the holiness and the perfection of your wife?

What can be greater wife than a husband who is full of the joy of the Lord as he serves Christ ahead of everything else because you're there helping him?

[24 : 33] Now that's the profound mystery that Paul is talking about. You see, marriage is not just about a couple coming together. it's an illustration of what Christ is doing with his people.

So every moment of your married life is a testimony to what Christ is doing with the church until he returns.

Does that change the way you deal with things? I hope it does. So where does that leave you? What are you going to do now? And all you single people you've been sitting here saying, yay, we'll pray for you married couples.

What's your memory verse? Where did we start? You, every single one of you who is a believer has been bought with a price. Every single one of you must honour God with your bodies.

That definitely includes sex. There is no place for sex outside of a marriage of a man and a woman. End of story.

[25 : 46] But nor is there any place for you to use your body in any other way that dishonours God. The way you eat, the way you sleep, the way you work, the way you play, the way you care for one another.

All of that is part of your duty, part of your, oh, it's not a duty, part of the joy of living for Christ. How could you think of doing anything else?

So, every one of you in this room, you, if you are Christ, have been bought with a price. And if you are not Christ's, this is hopeless.

Do you see, everything we've been saying is about how you relate to God, how you serve God, what hope we have for an eternity with God. If you are not Christ's, all of that is absent from you.

And you need Christ. And you need him today. But then for married couples, each one of you must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect your husband.

[26 : 51] There is no place in marriage for any compromise about your commitment to one another. None whatever. End of story.

again. We're ending a lot of stories today. But are you getting the point? It is very, very black and white. And then finally, the verse at the end of the passage, which we haven't yet looked at.

Verse 17. Some versions will have it as a separate section. I think it belongs with this.

Nevertheless, each person should live as a believer in whatever situation the Lord has assigned to them, just as God has called them. What has God called you to?

What you are today is what God has called you to today. Got that? What you are today is what God has called you to. He may, in fact, want you to be married if you're single.

[28 : 00] But today, right now, if you're not married, he's calling you to live as a single person in the purity and the perfection of serving Christ in that holiness that he calls you to.

Now, it may change. Let me tell you a little story. I've mentioned Priscilla a couple of times. I can't keep her out of it when we're talking about marriage. She came to New Zealand on a holiday from England.

Big mistake. She came to our church, and we'd heard about her. Her uncle had put us in touch and said that my spinster niece is coming out to New Zealand.

Spinster niece. I'm sort of thinking of late middle age. And then walks this obviously younger single woman. And she sits down, and I'm leading the service and preaching, and she's sitting in the pew, and she has to look at me for the whole service.

Poor girl. She looks and she thinks, yeah, nothing there. And I look at her and say, yeah, nothing there. So it's right, we get on with life. There came a time, never mind when, sometime later, when we're sitting talking and she looks at me with those beautiful eyes and she said, Michael, I don't think I will want to go home to England.

[29 : 19] Yes! Time to prepare for the proposal. Just what I wanted. But you see, yes, it is possible that God calls us to a change.

How did I know God wanted me to marry her? I knew that the moment the pastor said, you are man and wife. Up to that point, I was single.

I had plans, I had hopes, but I had to live in the calling in which God had called me to that point. And from the moment he said, you're married, then I had to live as a married man.

Do you see what Paul's getting at here? Whatever condition you are in, as a believer, notice he's talking to believers, that is how you are to live in the purity and the holiness he calls to, with a body given to the service of a holy God.

And we sang right at the beginning about a holy God, and we sang that only a holy God could bring us to that place where we live the holy life. So come to that holy God afresh and commit yourself, no, that's not even going to work.

[30 : 32] Ask God to commit himself to you afresh tonight to live a holy life. Let's pray. Father, as we bow before you now, we thank you for the wonder of a Saviour who died to redeem us to himself in holiness and beauty and perfection.

Help us to live as you have called us to live today. Help us to live for a future in which we will know with the whole body of Christ that glorious wedding feast.

Help us to be able to move, in whatever changes you bring into our lives with that same holiness, that same faithfulness. And Lord, we pray especially for the single people here.

Give them, each single one of them, a faithfulness and a purity and a freedom from sexual sin that demonstrates your power as only a holy God has.

And for each married couple, Father, come, refresh them in their love and their union with each other and in their calling to honour you in the way you've called them.

[31 : 54] And Father, we pray for this church. We pray that we might be a people here who faithfully display the glory and grace of the Lord Jesus Christ who saves and redeems and is forever with his people.

Amen.