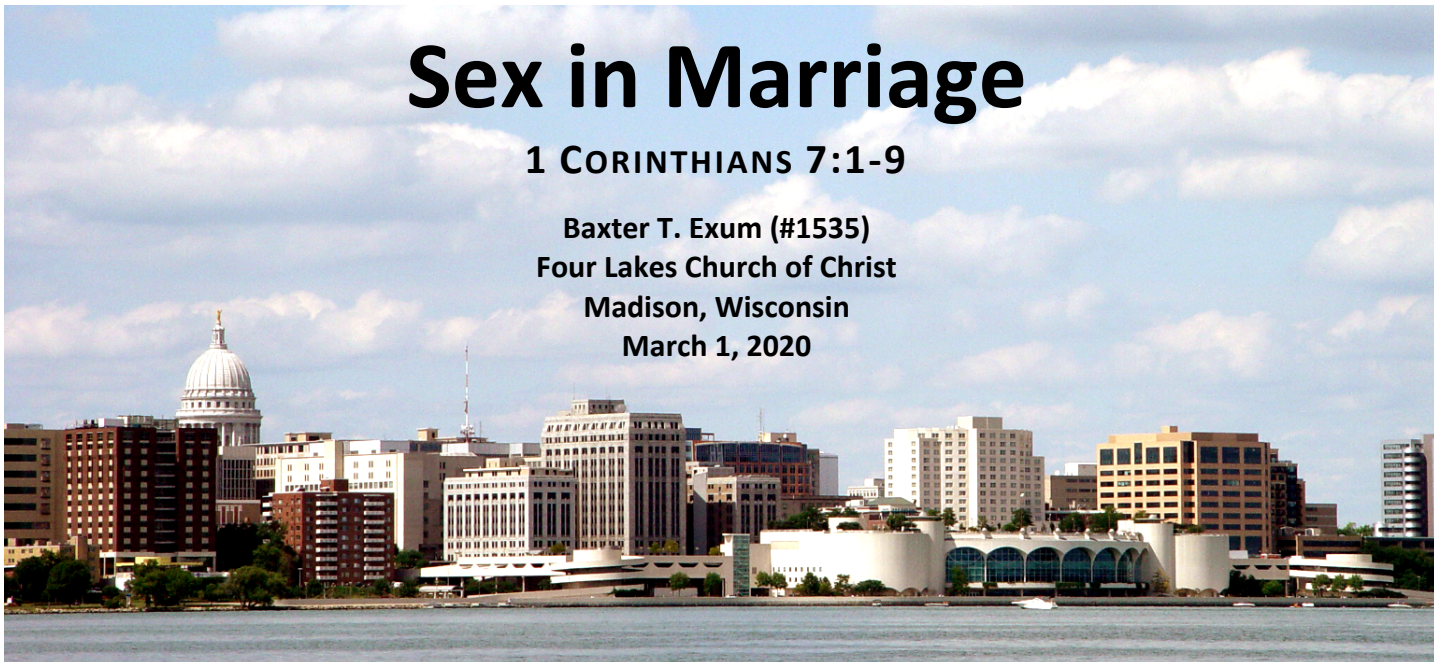


Sex in Marriage

1 CORINTHIANS 7:1-9

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This morning I would invite you to turn with me to 1 Corinthians 7 (p. 1788). Today I'd like to start a brief series of lessons based in this chapter, primarily because I'll be speaking at a series of lectures up in Minnesota at the end of April, and they've asked me to cover an interesting question from the middle of this chapter. So, as I prepare for that lecture, I'd like to widen the scope a bit, because in 1 Corinthians 7, the apostle Paul covers some very important material that we really haven't covered here. He's writing to the church in Corinth. With a population of roughly 600,000, Corinth was not only one of the largest cities in the Roman Empire, but it was also incredibly immoral. Corinth was the home to a temple dedicated to Aphrodite, the patron goddess of prostitutes, so you can imagine what worship was like at that temple. If we could imagine Camp Randall stadium full of prostitutes, we might have some idea of what it was like to live in that city. Corinth, then, had a reputation. And this immorality in the city made its way into the church. The church had some issues, and throughout the book of 1 Corinthians, Paul addresses these issues. And with many of these, Paul seems to be answering a series of questions. So, we have Paul's answers, but we don't have the questions.

Apparently, though, based on what Paul writes in chapters 5, 6, and 7, these people had some serious issues with sexual immorality. In Chapter 5, Paul has to deal with a man in the church, a Christian, who is living in sexual sin with his stepmother, and the church is actually proud of this, "Look how accepting we are!" Then, in Chapter 6, Paul deals with some people who seem to think it's okay to visit prostitutes – they seem to be saying that the spirit and body are separate, therefore, we can do anything we want to do with our bodies (like visiting prostitutes), and it has no effect on our soul or spirit. Paul deals with this in Chapter 6. And that's where we left off with our scripture reading this morning. Paul's conclusion to the prostitute issue is that what we do with our bodies does matter, because our bodies are basically temples of the Holy Spirit! And so we are to ***"Flee from sexual immorality."*** We are to glorify God with our bodies.

And this brings us to 1 Corinthians 7, where Paul continues with several other issues. So, over the next several weeks, I want us to move through 1 Corinthians 7, and we start this morning with verses 1-9 and what seems to be Paul's answer to the question of whether Christians have any business being intimate at all, and so he starts this chapter with a discussion of marriage. Again, we don't have the question, but based on Paul's answer, some people have perhaps gone to the other extreme and have decided that they will simply avoid intimacy altogether, the attitude "better safe than sorry." In Chapter 7:1-9, then, we have Paul's answer as he reasons

through this: Is sexual intimacy inherently evil in some way? And just to be safe, should we stay away from it altogether?

Obviously, these people have missed pretty much everything that the Bible has said on this subject! There's a chance they didn't have access to the Old Testament, and we know they didn't have access to the New Testament, because it hadn't been written yet! So, Paul has to answer this question in a nutshell – tastefully, accurately, and concisely. I guess I would ask: If you had only 200 words to explain God's plan for human sexuality to a group of immature Christians living in an out of control, evil culture, what would you write? This is pretty much what Paul does here. So, what we're about to read here is a brief summary.

If you want more, I've put references to some of the major passages on a handout this morning. So, if you want more info on God's plan for human sexuality, feel free to dig in (those are at the bottom of the first page). This morning, though, we pretty much have the highlights. In terms of scripture, this is perhaps all they have. So, Paul fits quite a bit into just a few verses. And so, if you've heard Paul say "no" to prostitutes, if you've heard Paul say "no" to having sex with your stepmother, and if you're now asking whether sex is ever okay at all, we have the answer in 1 Corinthians 7:1-9.

As we look at this passage, I'm hoping that we just let the Word speak to us. I realize that we're all different here this morning. We're at different stages of life, we come from different backgrounds. In a group of this size, we have had some really different experiences in this area – both good and bad. But the word speaks. And as you can see, I've put five major translations inside the handout, I've put *The Message* (a paraphrase) on the back, and I've also included this passage from *Da Jesus Book* on the back. *Da Jesus Book* is the Bible translated into the native language of Hawaii. So, we have some comparisons to make here. As we begin, though, let's notice, please, 1 Corinthians 7:1-9 (NASB),

¹ Now concerning the things about which you wrote, it is good for a man not to touch a woman. ² But because of immoralities, each man is to have his own wife, and each woman is to have her own husband. ³ The husband must fulfill his duty to his wife, and likewise also the wife to her husband. ⁴ 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. ⁵ Stop depriving one another, except by agreement for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer, and come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. ⁶ But this I say by way of concession, not of command. ⁷ 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. ⁸ But I say to the unmarried and to widows that it is good for them if they remain even as I. ⁹ But if they do not have self-control, let them marry; for it is better to marry than to burn with passion.

In the time we have left, I want us to make several observations...

- I. **...starting with verses 1-2 and verses 8-9, and the fact that WE AS HUMAN BEINGS HAVE SOME GOD-GIVEN NEEDS THAT CAN ONLY BE FULFILLED IN MARRIAGE – in other words, we have some BOUNDARIES, AND MARRIAGE IS THAT BOUNDARY.**

And in verse 1, we have the reminder that Paul seems to be answering a series of questions, ***"Now concerning the things about which you wrote."*** We see this several times in 1 Corinthians, and again, almost like Jeopardy,

we don't have the question, but we do have the answer. And at least part of the answer is, **"...it is good for a man not to touch a woman."** Again, I've put a number of translations on the handout, and you can see that they go in some different directions on this. Most literally, he says what we just read in the NASB. However, it seems that Paul is using a figure of speech. When he refers to **"touching a woman,"** he's not referring to a handshake or a high-five, but he's talking about sex. Remember: This is in the context of prostitutes as opposed to marriage. And in this context, Paul is saying: Generally speaking, it is good for a man not to touch a woman. In other words, don't be using women; don't be taking advantage of women; don't be touching women in that way; don't be treating women like the average Corinthian might be treating women; and certainly don't be treating women like the guy in Chapter 5 was treating women!

And dropping down to verses 8-9, notice how Paul does give complete celibacy as an option. We'll get back to this in two weeks as we discuss singles. But for now, in his personal opinion, at least, Paul basically says: Let's not go around **"touching women"** in that way; in fact, if you can stay single, great! In Paul's opinion, staying single is one really good way of staying within those boundaries: Stay single and live a life of celibacy. However, in this context, he does indicate that there is an acceptable, God-approved outlet for intimacy, and that outlet is marriage. In verse 7, both marriage and the single life are described as being a **"gift from God."** Both options have God's stamp of approval. However, up in verse 2, Paul explains that the urges God gave to us are so strong, sometimes it is good to be married. And this highlights one of the main weaknesses of the NASB, and that is: How they handle the word **"immoralities."** Notice: The KJV doesn't really translate it; they just carry it over from Greek into English; they basically turn a Greek word into an English word (like they did with "baptism"). They basically create the word **"fornication."** The NASB translates this word as **"immoralities."** That's not specific enough! You'll notice that all of the others are much better with this one, referring specifically to **"sexual immoralities."** And this is what Paul is warning about here: Because of sexual temptation in particular, **"each man is to have his own wife, and each woman is to have her own husband."** In other words, because this desire is so strong, some of you people need to get married! Notice: He doesn't say, "Get engaged." He doesn't say, "Establish a committed relationship and move in together." But the command is: Get married! Marriage between a man and a woman is the only God-approved option for this behavior.

I know, up to this point, we've been just a bit negative, in a sense. And I'm afraid that's the way many people in the world might hear us talking about this. When it comes to sex, the message often is, "Don't, don't, don't!" And it's easy to get the wrong impression here. Yes, there is danger, there are some things we are not to do in this area (polygamy is excluded here, homosexuality is excluded here), but marriage between a man and a woman is God's "Yes" on this issue. This is okay! This is good!

I would also point out: In this passage, there's more to sex than making children. And I mention this, because some religious groups teach that unless children are a possibility, even husbands and wives shouldn't be getting together like this. In other words, they've made the rule that all forms of birth control are sin. But that's not in the Bible. Some forms may be right or wrong depending on how they work (that's another study). But here, sex in marriage is described as an outlet for desire, as a way to ward off temptation. Having children isn't even given as a purpose here.

Just a note on the translations: I find it interesting how various translators handle the very last phrase, **"It is better to marry than to burn."** That's about as literal as it gets, going from Greek to English. But notice how many of them refer to burning **"with passion."** The NASB puts those last two words in italics, indicating that they were added by the translators, to help it make sense. The KJV is the most accurate here, leaving that out altogether. *The Message* adds all kinds of words, referring to living **"a sexually tortured life as a single."** Those

words aren't in there at all! *Da Jesus Book* says, "**Mo betta to marry den come all hot.**" In my opinion, burning with passion is probably what Paul had in mind here. However, are there other ways to "**burn**" with reference to having sex outside of marriage? Absolutely! Hell comes to mind, along with some other possibilities; but I just wanted us to notice how the translators have handled this.

The point here at the beginning is that God has given us some BOUNDARIES here, and these boundaries are for our own good. And *The Message* seems to capture this quite well in the second half of verse 2, "**Sexual drives are strong, but marriage is strong enough to contain them and provide for a balanced and fulfilling sexual life in a world of sexual disorder.**" That seems to be exactly what Paul is getting at here. Marriage is for our own good.

- II. **As we get back to the text, let's also notice (in verses 3-4) that within the marriage relationship, HUSBANDS AND WIVES ARE TO SERVE EACH OTHER IN THIS AREA, THEY ARE TO SATISFY EACH OTHER IN THIS AREA, THERE IS A DUTY OR RESPONSIBILITY TO BE FULFILLED.**

And it goes back to the idea that in marriage, we aren't really in charge of ourselves any more. What was once mine is now ours – cars, and bank accounts, and everything else – we are no longer in charge of ourselves any more; but instead, we are now "**one flesh**," as God says in Genesis 2. In marriage, we give up our own personal rights, and we now have an obligation or a debt that we owe to this person we've married. It's not about me any more.

And we notice how it starts with the husband – not that the husband has a right to make demands here (as we might expect in the ancient world), but the exact opposite: In verse 3, the husband has a "**duty**" to his wife, and in verse 4 we find that the husband no longer has "**authority**" over his own body. Those are some serious words. In the same way, the wife also has a "**duty**" to her husband and no longer has "**authority**" over her own body either. And so, in marriage, we give ourselves to another person, and our mission in life is to satisfy, not ourselves, but them! It's not about us anymore. I'm always surprised how radically different this is from the culture, not only back then, but now as well. Back then, men would often dominate their wives, making all kinds of demands, and both Roman and Jewish culture were just fine with that. That's the way it was. But here, Paul absolutely turns that upside down. And then today, it's all about the individual – I need to do whatever has to be done to make myself happy. But here, Paul says that it is not about us; instead, it's all about making our partner happy. This is the opposite of selfishness. And so, what Paul says here is completely counter-cultural, both then and now.

In terms of translations, I always get a kick out of the KJV here: The husband must "**render unto the wife due benevolence.**" That sounds so 1600's! The ESV refers to "conjugal rights." The first thing that comes to my mind is a "conjugal visit" at a prison. "**Conjugal**" is not a word I use very often, if ever. I looked it up this morning, and the word "**conjugal**" goes back to the early-1600's, it comes from Latin, and it literally refers to those who are "yoked together." But the point is: Those of us who are married, those of us who are "yoked together," have an obligation, a duty, a debt, that we owe to another person. And again, this isn't a debt that we demand to be paid, but this is a debt that we owe.

What if one partner just can't right now? What if there are some health concerns or some temporary circumstances that just don't let it happen? During our last semester in college, we had an entire class in Human Sexuality. It was a senior-level class pretty much aimed at those who were heading into a career doing some kind of counseling or therapy. The professor was a therapist himself, and I remember what he said on this. If

you just can't at that moment (for whatever reason), say this, "I would love to, dear, but I can't right now, but if you can wait until 9 o'clock Tuesday night, I'll make it worth the wait." Of course, you need to follow through, but we have had some good laughs about that through the years. By the way, that class is why nobody knew or will ever know where we went on our honeymoon. That professor had a horror story that caused us to make our honeymoon a complete secret. Nobody will ever know. We will die with that information! My wife has an aunt, and whenever we see her in Ohio, she's always asking, "So, where was it?" Never!

The point is: In marriage, we do whatever it is we need to do to. What is that? I don't know. We need to talk through it with each other! Paul gives us so much freedom here. There has to be communication. There has to be growth and adjustment through the years. One of the struggles is: The longer we're married, the more baggage we have. So, there has to be forgiveness, and understanding, and humility. And since men and women are different, all of this also requires a lifetime of learning and a willingness to grow. We might need to do some reading and research. Certainly we can pray about it. But the main idea in verses 3-4 is that husbands and wives have a duty to serve each other.

III. As we come to the end of this passage, there's another aspect of all of this as Paul addresses a special danger, THE DANGER OF DEPRIVING EACH OTHER.

In verse 5, he comes right out and says it, "**Stop depriving one another.**" You might notice that the KJV uses the word "**defraud.**" Literally, "**Stop stealing, stop robbing.**" The word refers to "**cheating**" somebody out of what is rightfully theirs, and Paul says, "**Stop it.**" If you are cheating your partner in this way, "**stop it.**" And I think we can safely assume that there were some Christians in Corinth who were guilty of this. That's why Paul has to say it. This is a sin that needs to be repented of. Imagine being a part of the church in ancient Corinth, and this letter from Paul arrives. One of the elders stands up to read the letter, and he gets to this section. I would imagine there might have been some blushing, perhaps some jabbing with elbows. How embarrassing to be called out like this! But, this is a problem that needs to be corrected, "**Stop depriving one another.**"

However, we also notice in verse 5 that Paul does give an exception, but it's a very narrow exception. It's an exception with some rules. First of all, it has to be "**by agreement.**" The word he uses here is the basis of our English word "symphony." It refers to speaking or sounding out together. So, if you stop, it needs to be completely mutual. This isn't a case of one partner deciding on his or her own that we're not doing that anymore. It has to be mutual. Secondly, there's a time factor here. This isn't permanent, but the pause is somewhat brief. This is "**for a time.**" And then finally, there is a purpose to it, "**so that you may devote yourselves to prayer.**" So, the only exception here is a mutually agreed upon brief pause for the purpose of prayer.

But the message is: Even if you take a break for some holy reason, you need to "**come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.**" In other words, there is a danger here. If you go too long, you might go looking elsewhere. Some of the commentaries compare this to eating. We all know how dangerous it is to go grocery shopping while we're hungry. If you've been fasting for 24 hours, that's not the time to go to Woodman's! In the same way, if you take a pause in your marriage, come back together again so that Satan won't tempt you. When we are especially hungry for something, we don't always make the best decisions – whether that's in a quiet place with a boyfriend or girlfriend, whether it's the temptation of pornography or the temptation of connecting with somebody we're not married to – Satan knows this, and he takes advantage of it. So, in marriage, do not be starving each other. But notice that even this temporary pause is not a command. Paul is not commanding this; he is allowing it. "**But this I say by way of concession, not of**

command,” he says. He then goes on to give his wish (his opinion) that everybody could be like him (not really affected by temptation in this area), but he realizes that all of us are different.

Conclusion:

Again, I hope we can spend two more weeks in this chapter. Next week, we hope to move ahead to verses 10-16 where Paul has some inspired advice for couples going through some difficulties. And then the week after that hopefully we can finish by looking at some of Paul’s inspired advice for those who might choose to live the single life.

Let’s close this morning with Isaiah 53:6, where the prophet Isaiah says that, **“All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way.”** That’s the bad news. The bad news is that all of us have turned away from God, whether in this area or any other. We’ve failed to live up to the ideal. The good news comes in the rest of this passage, **“But the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him.”** The **“Him”** in this passage is Jesus, the same Jesus who met a woman caught in the very act of adultery, this woman who had been dragged out into public, and the Lord’s message to her was a message of forgiveness and compassion, **“Go. From now on sin no more.”** And that’s his message to us today. He offers forgiveness for anyone willing to turn to him in faith, turning away from sin, to anyone who is willing to publicly admit that he is the Christ, the Son of God, to anyone willing to be baptized into his death, an immersion in water for the forgiveness of sins. If we can help in some way, let us know as we sing this next song. Let’s stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: foullakeschurch@gmail.com