

High Peaks Bible Fellowship

More About Sexual Purity and Male-Female Relations 1 Corinthians 7:1-16

Introduction

- Paul had previously discussed the issue of sexual immorality (1 Cor 5:1-13; 6:9-20), and it appears that the Corinthians also had misconceptions about sexual relations even within marriage. So in this chapter Paul continues to deal with this subject of sexual purity, and he answers their questions about marriage as well.
- In the first sixteen verses Paul addressed at least four distinct groups of people, and for each of these groups he discussed a specific topic of importance:

Group Being Addressed	Topic of Discussion	Passage
Married Believers	Sexual purity within marriage	verses 1-7
Unmarried & Widowed Believers	Possibility of future marriage	verses 8-9
Married Believers	Possibility of divorce and remarriage	verses 10-11
Mixed Marriages	Possibility of separation or divorce	verses 12-16

“Concerning the things about which you wrote” (1 Cor 7:1)

- Paul begins answering specific questions the Corinthians asked him in a letter they wrote. It is possible that this letter was delivered by the members of Chloe’s household (1 Cor 1:11), or more likely by Stephanas and Fortunatus and Achaicus (1 Cor 16:17) who were probably the official representatives of the Corinthian church.
- “Touching a woman” occurs in the context of abstaining from sexual immorality (1 Cor 5:1-5; 6:9-20; 7:2, 7:9), and that is the sense in which a man is not to touch a woman. Paul is continuing to discuss the issue of sexual immorality, and this will lead him into a discussion of marriage, because marriage is the God-ordained institution which provides a legitimate outlet for sexual passions.
- Paul may also be quoting a Corinthian teacher who was saying that, “It is good for a man not to touch a woman.” If this is so, then it gives insight into what was going on in that church. It is quite possible someone was teaching that sex was unspiritual, and that celibacy was the only way to maintain spiritual purity. Many of the Greek philosophers abstained from marriage. They were like the false teachers that Paul condemned in 1 Timothy 4:3. In direct contrast with these false teachers, Paul was not against marriage. As we will see later (in 1 Cor 7:25-40) Paul thought there were certain practical advantages to remaining single, but in no way could Paul be accused of forbidding or demeaning marriage.

To Christians who are Married – Concerning Sexual Purity within Marriage (1 Cor 7:2-7)

- 1 Cor 7:2 begins with a contrast word. Paul could have written, “But in contrast to the idea that it is good for a man not to touch a woman, each man is to have his own wife.” The reason Paul gives for each man having his own wife, and each woman having her own husband, is “because of immoralities” (*porneia* = any kind of forbidden sexual intercourse). This was the same word used in 1 Cor 5:1; 6:13; and 6:18 when Paul was discussing sexual immorality.
- Paul acknowledges that believers may experience sexual temptations while living in a fallen world, and he is reminding Christians that God has provided a sanctioned or legitimate way for those sexual urges to be satisfied. In 1 Cor 7:3 Paul says that both the husband and the wife have a mutual obligation to each other regarding their normal sexual desires. The words Paul used are also used of the obligation to repay a debt that is owed. Paul makes it clear that sexual relations in marriage are not simply a privilege and a pleasure but a responsibility, and that celibacy belongs to the unmarried life rather than to the married life. Apparently some of

the Corinthian believers thought that in order to be more spiritual they must abstain from sexual relations even within marriage, but Paul says this is wrong.

- Not only must the husband & wife fulfill their duty to each other in an active sense, but in 1 Cor 7:4 Paul addresses the passive submission or relinquishing control of one's own body for the benefit of the marriage partner. When the man and woman enter into the marriage covenant, an exclusive transfer of authority takes place – they assign to each other (and only to each other) the right and responsibility for the pure and proper sexual use of each other's bodies.
- Apparently some couples in Corinth were practicing celibacy within their marriage relationship. Paul refers to that practice as “depriving one another” and in 1 Cor 7:5 he tells them to stop doing this. Only one exception was allowed to the rule regarding the duty of husbands and wives to each other, and this exception was carefully limited:
 1. Abstinance must be by the mutual agreement of both partners.
 2. It must be for a limited time period.
 3. It must be for a religious purpose.
 4. It must be only temporary. Normal marital relations should be resumed and continued. The reason Paul gives for this is that Satan is able to tempt believers to feed their fleshly impulses, and he may tempt the unsatisfied married partner to engage in sexual immorality.
- *This* Paul says by way of concession rather than command (1 Cor 7:6). The meaning of the verse depends upon what the word “This” refers to. There are at least two possibilities:
 1. Married couples are allowed to abstain but not commanded to abstain. God did not give a commandment that said, “Thou shalt abstain from marital relations periodically to enhance your prayer life.” But married believers are permitted to do so if they follow the guidelines Paul gave them.
 2. Marriage is not commanded for believers: singleness and marriage are both permitted. Paul might be referring to the idea (first stated in 1 Cor 7:2) that God's sanctioned outlet for sexual desires is within marriage. In this case Paul may be saying, “I am aware of the benefits of being single and celibate, and I am also aware of the privileges and responsibilities of being married. So I am not commanding that every believer should be married. If you are single that is fine, and if you are married then stay married and maintain normal marital relations. Your spirituality is not determined by your marital status.” God did not give a commandment that said, “Thou shalt get married.” It is a matter of individual choice according to the gifts that God has given. This is what Paul elaborates on in the next verse, so the context seems to support this second possibility for the meaning of the verse.
- In 1 Cor 7:7 Paul expresses his wish or desire that all believers would follow his example in controlling their sexual desires through exercising self-control as well as appropriating the special gift that God can provide, especially under the present circumstances (see 1 Cor 7:26). This is similar to Jesus' own teaching on the topic of celibacy in Matthew 19:11-12. Some believers have the gift of forsaking the blessings of married life for the sake of God's work. Others have the gift of being married and establishing a home and family. The decision to get married or not should be made in the light of the gift God has given to each person.

To Unmarried and Widowed Believers – Concerning the Possibility of Marriage (1 Cor 7:8-9)

- In 1 Cor 7:8 Paul now directly addresses believers who were unmarried and those who had been married but whose spouse had died. He restates his preference (from verse 7) that all believers would follow his own example of controlling their fleshly passions and remaining content with their current state. He specifically stated that it would be good if they are able to remain sexually pure. If believers decide not to marry, then they should follow Paul's example and keep their sexual desires under control. But what if they find it impossible to do this? That is what Paul deals with in the next verse.
- Paul says in 1 Cor 7:9 that if single believers are not able to exercise sexual self-restraint, if they find themselves constantly inflamed with sexual urges, then they should marry. Single believers may find life and service for the Lord to be difficult if they continually burn with sexual passions – even if their passions never give way to actual immorality.
- Self-control is something that every believer should exercise (as enabled by God's indwelling Holy Spirit). It is never an excuse for a believer to say that he fell into sexual sin because God did not give him the necessary self-control!
- It is obvious that a lack of sexual self-control is not the only reason to get married. God may have given you the desire and even the gift of being married, being a life-long helper and partner to someone, as well as raising a

family to the glory of God. If Paul's statements on the motivation for marriage seem rather limited, it is because in this context he is specifically dealing with overcoming the temptation to engage in sexual immorality. There are many other places in Paul's writings where he presents a more well-rounded and beautiful picture of God's plan for marriage.

To Married Believers – Concerning Divorce and Remarriage (1 Cor 7:10-11)

- In 1 Cor 7:10 Paul directly addresses married Christians, and he discusses the issue of divorce and remarriage. He says, "I give instructions, not I, but the Lord" Paul is reminding believers of the direct teaching of Jesus on the subject of divorce and remarriage. He used the same Greek word he had previously used in the Thessalonian letters for a direct command (*parangéllō*). So what Paul says here is not a matter of preference, but a matter of following the commandment of the Lord Jesus Christ.
- The wife should not leave (*chorizo*) her husband = to separate from, put away, depart. This is the same word used by Jesus when He said, "What therefore God has joined together, let no man *separate*." (Matt 19:6) It refers to a wife seeking a divorce from her husband. We do not know exactly why some believers wanted to divorce each other, but it could be that they thought they could live holier lives if they returned to a state of singleness and celibacy.
- In the last part of 1 Cor 7:11 Paul commands the husband not to divorce (*aphiemi*) his wife = it means to send away, to leave or depart from. This is the same word Paul will use in 1 Cor 7:13 when he said the wife must not send her husband away either. Again, Paul is reminding believers of the words of the Lord Jesus Christ who taught that marriage should be for life and that divorce is contrary to God's plan for marriage.
- The first part of 1 Cor 7:11 provides a parenthetical comment. Although the command of Jesus forbids separation and divorce between Christian marriage partners, Paul recognized that some Christian marriages could break up. Here he gives some guidelines for how to handle this situation. It introduces a third class conditional clause, which indicates that there is a future probability that this situation might happen. If believers do leave their Christian partners, here are their only options:
 1. Remain unmarried, or
 2. Be reconciled to the original partner.

Notice that it is the believer who separates that must make the effort to reconcile with the spouse. But a reconciliation could not take place if the departing spouse decided to remarry, so Paul stresses the importance of remaining unmarried while making every effort to reconcile. The implication is that in any separation there should be no thought of remarriage. In cases when reconciliation would be impossible, it is the duty of the one who left to stay unmarried.

To Mixed Marriages – Concerning Separation & Divorce (1 Cor 7:12-16)

- Some of the believers in Corinth had come to faith in Christ after they were already married, and some of their marriage partners had not trusted Christ. This created a situation where there were mixed marriages – a believer being married to an unbeliever. Some of these believers may have thought it would be wrong for them to remain married to an unbeliever, and that the marriage covenant they entered into as unbelievers became void after they put their faith in Christ. They may have thought that if their spouse does not share the same spirituality or the same calling for service to God, that separating from such an unspiritual partner would please the Lord. But Paul says a husband and wife who were married as unbelievers cannot claim that their new faith nullifies their marriage.
- "I say, not the Lord." Paul had restated the direct teaching of the Lord Jesus concerning divorce, but Jesus had not given any instructions about mixed marriages. So here in 1 Cor 7:12 Paul is saying that since the Lord had not given any previous revelation on this subject, Paul was going to provide it under the direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit.
- 1 Cor 7:12-13 make it clear that the marriage is still valid even after one of the partners comes to faith in Christ. The believer must not initiate any action that would break up the marriage or cause the unbelieving spouse to leave. Also it is clear that the believing partner is obligated to stay with the unbelieving spouse if the unbeliever is willing to do so.
- Some believers in Corinth may have wanted to separate from their unbelieving partners thinking that they would be defiled by the non-Christian, and the children of such a union would somehow be unclean. But in 1 Cor 7:14 Paul answers this concern by saying that quite the opposite is true. Instead of the unbeliever defiling the relationship, the believer has the effect of sanctifying the marriage partner, in the sense of setting him apart

for special and direct spiritual influence. Even one believer in a home brings blessing to the whole household. And even though the believer's faith cannot bring salvation for anyone but himself, he is often the means of other family members coming to the Lord by the testimony of his godly life.

- Paul had dealt with the case of a mixed marriage in which the unbeliever was willing to stay, but now in 1 Cor 7:15 he deals with the other alternative. If the unbeliever leaves, then the believer should allow him to leave. If the unbeliever agrees to remain then the believer is bound to remain also, but if the unbeliever leaves then the believer is not under bondage. If married to an unbeliever who leaves, the believer is not bound to maintain the marriage or provide for the one that departed. He is at liberty to live separately. Paul's words here would free the believer from any stigma or blame for a separation he could do nothing about. But the initiative for the separation must come from the unbeliever, never from the believer.
- "God has called us to peace," so if the unbeliever departs, he is to be allowed to do so peaceably rather than to have contention and strife. Even though it is very traumatic to be deserted by one's husband or wife, it is possible for a believer's peace to be maintained because it is not primarily derived from a husband or wife, but from the Lord Jesus Christ. No matter what may happen, believers can still have peace because they are in Christ.
- Does desertion by the unbelieving spouse free the believing partner to remarry? Some say that "desertion is a breach of the marriage contract, and a dissolution of the bond, and the deserted person may lawfully marry again." (Gill) But notice that in this passage the apostle Paul does not address the issue of remarriage after separation from an unbelieving partner. He does say that after separation from a believing spouse, a believer should remain unmarried (1 Cor 7:11). The only time remarriage is permitted is if one's spouse has died (1 Cor 7:39). What if the unbelieving spouse left and then immediately remarried, does that mean the first marriage is officially dissolved and the deserted believer is then free to remarry? Again, Paul does not address that specific case here. But it seems that throughout this entire context Paul has been working to ensure that marriages remain intact. He has been encouraging believers to keep their marriages together, rather than to break them up and start all over again in another marriage. If a believer's marriage partner is still living (no matter what the situation), this passage does not give the believer permission to remarry.
- In 1 Cor 7:16 Paul asks two hopeful questions. "For how do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife?" Obviously only God can save any person, so this is salvation in the sense of the godly testimony of a Christian marriage partner, and there is good reason to hope that an unbeliever under such an influence might eventually become a believer as well. But even if the unbelieving spouse leaves, it is still possible for the believer's godly example to eventually save the unbeliever in spite of a separation.

Points of Application

- As believers we should guard ourselves from false teaching. We need to remember that the correct understanding of life and godliness is found in the Word of God. Do not let the unbelieving culture we live in define what it means to be spiritual.
- Believers also need to understand our current constitution (see the lesson on 1 Cor 3:1-4). We do still carry fleshly passions around with us, and we must learn to control them with the help of the indwelling Holy Spirit. All believers should follow the example of the apostle Paul in exercising self-restraint and guarding ourselves from sexual immorality. It is better to marry than to burn with passion (1 Cor 7:9), but it is better to struggle with these passions than to give in to sin!
- Whether they are married or not, believers should uphold God's standards for marriage. And whether married or not, believers have a responsibility to live a godly life and provide an attractive testimony so that others may be saved.

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Our primary purpose is to uphold the truths of the Word of God.

I write so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth. (1 Timothy 3:15)

Our primary responsibility is to equip the saints for the work of ministry.

And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ. (Ephesians 4:11-12)