

God's Wisdom For A Biblical Marriage

1 Corinthians 7:1-16

Intro. Marriage (and sex) is a great gift from a great God. Unfortunately, sinful humans often make a mess of this great gift and miss out on all the good things God intended for us to enjoy. In 1 Corinthians alone Paul addresses incest (5:1), fornication, adultery and homosexuality (6:9-10). We know from ancient records that sexual abuse was a common practice among Greeks and Romans by means of pederasty and also the mistreatment of slaves by their owners (see Marguerite Johnson and Terry Ryan, *Sexuality In Greek and Roman Society and Literature: A Sourcebook*). Now, in chapter 7, Paul has to address ascetics who were arguing the married should abstain from sexual relations. What a mess! Sexual libertarians and ascetics were trying to do church together in Corinth and both were off track as to God's design and plan. Paul will take the time to address this problem, a problem for which the Corinthians themselves have sought his counsel by means of a letter. The repetition of the phrase, "Now in response to the matters you wrote about" (7:1, 25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1, 12) would indicate this. Paul will address sex in marriage, but other issues related to marriage as well. This is one of, if not, the most helpful chapters in the Bible on marriage. Its instruction is as relevant in the 21st century as it was in the 1st.

I. God has helpful principles for those who are married 7:1-5

God created marriage in the Garden of Eden when he joined Adam and Eve together (Gen 2). Prior to the Fall (Gen 3) they lived in perfect union and harmony. However, with sin's entrance things changed and not for the better. Ever since our "living on the other side of Eden," there has been conflict and confusion in marriage. At Corinth, some were living in unspeakable sexual immorality. Others, in contrast, had come to believe abstaining from sex all-together, even in marriage, was a better way. Paul will address both extremes with biblical and practical wisdom. As we walk through these verses we should heed to counsel of Warren Wiersbe, "keep in mind that Paul is replying to definite questions. He is not spelling out a complete "theology of marriage" in one chapter. It is necessary to consider as well what the rest of the Bible has to say about this important subject" (*Be Wise*, 85).

1) Pursue Purity 7:1-2

Paul received a letter from the Corinthians who had several questions. One pertains to sex. At Corinth some are saying "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman" (v.1). Celibacy, it is being argued, is the higher ideal and the more spiritual way. Paul responds very practically, "But because sexual immorality (lit. "because of immoralities") is so common, each man should have sexual relations with his own wife, and

each woman should have sexual relations with her own husband” (v.2)

Genesis 1-2 teaches us that God gave us marriage for procreation and partnership. Song of Song teaches us our Lord gave us sex in marriage for pleasure. Paul now adds the gift of sex in marriage is also for purity. Our sex drives are strong, especially in our youth. Unfortunately, sexual temptation is everywhere present. As a protection and to honor the purity God intends for sexual expression, both men and women should find satisfaction with their mate and only their mate. This is God’s good design for sexual expression and enjoyment. Sex is not a bad or dirty thing. It is a good and pure thing within the covenant of marriage in the eyes of God. In an article entitled, “What’s Allowed in Married Sex,” Ray Ortlund highlights 4 biblical principles: 1) Freedom (Prov. 5:18); 2) Sensitivity (1 Pet. 3:7); 3) Agreement (1 Cor. 7:5); and 4) Exclusivity (Ex. 20:14) [Gospel Coalition, 9-27-21]. Sex in marriage is normal and it is good.

2) Pursue Partnership 7:3-4

Paul now applies the partnership principle in marriage to a couple’s sex life. God’s design again is clearly seen as heterosexual and monogamous. And, it is a relationship where we seek to honor and serve well our mate. When it comes to sex, “A husband should fulfill his marital duty (*ESV*, “her conjugal rights”) to his wife, and likewise a wife to her husband” (v.3). This

mutual service to one another is grounded and rooted in the biblical principle of the “one flesh” union that has taken place (Gen. 2:24). We now belong to one another because we are one. Therefore, as verse four affirms, “A wife does not have the right over her own body, but her husband does. In the same way, a husband does not have the right over his own body, but his wife does.” The reciprocal and mutual relationship Paul advocates would have been surprising, if not shocking, in his day. Mark Taylor writes, “commentators...frequently note Paul’s revolutionary stance regarding the mutuality of the relationship of husband and wife by ancient standards” (*I Cor.* NAC, 166). My mate’s body is God’s gift to me, and my body is God’s gift to them. Such gifts should be honored; treated with love, care, and respect. They are also to be enjoyed!

3) Pursue Prayer 7:5-6

Paul will make one allowance for a limited period of time where a couple refrains from sexual activity: prayer. And, even here, it is a concession and not a command. “Do not deprive one another – except when you agree for a time (*ESV*, “except perhaps by agreement”), to devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again; otherwise, Satan may tempt you because of your lack of self-control. I say this as a concession, not as a command.” Paul’s argument can be summarized like this. Sex in marriage is normal and to be

expected. It is one means whereby God protects us from the temptations of Satan and the desires for sex that could lead to sexual immorality. Now, it is possible, but certainly not necessary, that the two of you together agree to take a “fast” from sex in order to devote yourselves to a season of prayer. That is fine, but limit the time and then come back together in sexual intimacy. Leon Morris provides a helpful comment on this point:

“for married people the breaking off of normal relations, even for such a holy purpose, can be only by mutual consent. Then the couple must *come together again*. Otherwise the strength of their natural passions means that they will place themselves at Satan’s mercy.” (*1 Cor.*, TNTC, 103).

God has some very good guidelines for the good gifts of marriage and sex. He knows best because they were His ideas to begin with!

II. God gifts all of us according to His will 7:7-9

In 1 Corinthians 12-14 Paul addresses the important issue of spiritual gifts (esp. tongues in ch.14). His list, I believe, is substantial but it is not exhaustive. One reason I believe that to be true is because of these three verses. Here Paul teaches us that God gifts us in terms of singleness and marriage. I believe we will also see that this gifting may be permanent or

for a season according to his specific divine plan for each of our lives. One thing I do know. Whatever that plan is it is best for us!

1) Some are gifted for singleness 7:7-8

Paul begins this section with an expression from his heart, “I wish that all people were as I am.” Paul was single, and he felt this was a preferable way to serve the Lord. He will expound on this in verses 32-35. Whether Paul was always single we do not know. Scripture is silent at this point. Marriage is a blessing but there are natural and inescapable burdens that come with it. It would have been extremely difficult for Paul to conduct all the missionary work he did with a wife and family. However, Paul recognizes that not every person has the gift of singleness (cf Matt. 19:12). In fact, most don’t. Paul acknowledges this and writes, “But each has his own gift from God, one person has this gift, another has that” (v.7). It is God who gifts us, for a season or permanently, for singleness or for marriage. That is His call. Thus, Paul can say to the unmarried and to widows: “It is good for them if they remain as I am” (v.8). Singleness is a blessing for those who have that gift. It is not unnatural, and it is not less than God’s best. Indeed, in some practical ways it is better (cf v.32). If this is God’s calling for you, be content in it. In fact, rejoice in it. You are set free to serve Christ with no strings attached.

2) Some are gifted for marriage 7:9

Verse 9 picks up on what Paul said in verses 5-6 as he addresses those with the gift of marriage. Again, his counsel is very practical: “But if they do not have self-control, they should marry, since it is better to marry than burn with desire” (*ESV*, “passion”). In the original text verse nine ends with the word “burn.” This leads some interpreters to believe Paul means to burn in hell (Morris, 105). However, the understanding of both the *CSB* and *ESV* is better. Schreiner is helpful, “One indication that one should get married is if one has strong sexual desires. If one has the opportunity for marriage, and sexual desires are strong, marriage is the best option, and one should not try to be what one is not” (p. 139). Some, most, are gifted for marriage. A strong desire for sex would be an indication of this. Again, God’s design and plan is clear. Virginty before marriage and monogamy in marriage. No sex before marriage. No sex outside of marriage. All sex within marriage. God’s design is not to keep us from sex. His plan is to keep us for sex in marriage. This is God’s plan. And, it is a good plan.

III. God’s ideal is for marriage to last until death part us 7:10-16

In a broken world things break. Tragically and too often, it is a marriage. In the western world divorce has become simply a part of the natural ebb and flow of life. It happens. In fact, the odd thing, the exceptional thing, is

for a marriage to go the distance until separated by death. However, divorce is not in God's perfect plan. Jesus, himself, made this abundantly clear.

1) A believing marriage should avoid divorce 7:10-11

Paul turns to those who are presently married and draws on the words of Jesus found in Matthew 5:31-32; 19:3-12 (cf. Mark 10:1-12; Luke 16:18).

Paul says these words come as a “command,” a divine order. “A wife is not to leave her husband. But if she does leave, she must remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband— and a husband is not to divorce his wife” (vs 10-11). Several important points need to be highlighted.

- 1) God desires for marriage to be permanent.
- 2) God allows for separation in a troubled marriage.
- 3) God always desires for reconciliation to take place, if at all possible, in troubled marriages.
- 4) Divorce and remarriage among believers, except for marital sexual unfaithful (see Matt 5:32; 19:9), is wrong and sinful. And, even when there is sexual unfaithfulness in a believing marriage, God's desire is for reconciliation and restoration to take place.

These are certainly strange sounding words in a culture that has trivialized the covenantal nature of marriage as designed by God. They sound quaint

and old fashion. Well, they are old, going all the way back to Jesus. As our Lord said in Matthew 19:6, “Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate.” There is a permanence to marriage we ignore at great peril to ourselves and to our families and to our society.

2) A mixed marriage depends on the desires of the unbelieving spouse
7:12-16

Paul now moves to address a situation that Jesus did not specifically address. That is why he says in verse 12, “But I (not the Lord) say to the rest.” He is not implying his words are less inspired than those of Jesus. He will conclude this section in verse 40 by saying, “And I think I also have the Spirit of God.” All Scripture is inspired by God” (2 Tim. 3:16). The words of Paul, Peter and John, as well as all the writers of Scripture, are just as inspired as the words of our Savior. We can believe and trust all of it.

Paul now addresses what we call a “mix marriage” where one spouse is a believer and the other spouse an unbeliever. Most likely one became a Christian after they married (see 2 Cor. 6:14). A believer should not marry an unbeliever. Paul’s instructions here are clear and to the point: “If any brother [believer] has an unbelieving wife and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. Also, if any woman has an unbelieving husband and his willing to live with her, she must not divorce her husband” (vs 12-13). The God ordained permanence of marriage is not dissolved

when one partner becomes a Christian. Again, Schreiner's comments are helpful: "remaining in a marriage with an unbeliever is pleasing to God even if one has an unbelieving wife or an unbelieving husband. Given the culture of Paul's day, it is remarkable that a wife is given the same status as a husband" (143). So, remaining in the marriage pleases God. And, there is a further blessing that follows as verse 14 shows us.

"For the unbelieving husband is made holy by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy by the husband. Otherwise, your children would be unclean, but as it is they are holy" (v.14). Now, let's first address what Paul is not saying. He is not saying the unbelieving spouse and the children are saved. That would be contrary to all that the Bible teaches about salvation being a personal decision to trust Christ for salvation. I love Leon Morris, but he is way off base when he writes, "Until he is old enough to take the responsibility upon himself, the child of a believing parent is to be regarded as a Christian" (Morris, *1 Cor.*, TNTC, 107). The Bible never speaks in these terms. What Paul means, I believe, is something like this. Because of the presence of a believing spouse and parent, others in the family are set apart (the meaning of the word "holy" here) in a sanctified relationship and for a gospel witness and the beauty of the Christian life. We

see something similar to this in 1 Peter 3:1-6. I especially like the insights of Simon Kistemaker at this point:

“Paul is not saying that an unbelieving husband or wife has been made morally holy through his or her Christian spouse. No, man is unable to sanctify or to save a fellow human being. What the apostle means to say is that an unbelieving spouse who lives intimately with a Christian marriage partner experiences the influence of holiness.

To be sanctified means that a person is influenced by the claims of Christ. The converse is equally true: anyone who is not sanctified is influenced by the claims of a world that is opposed to Christ. In the Greek, the verb *to be sanctified* is in the perfect tense, which denotes that from the moment the spouse became a Christian his or her unbelieving partner comes in contact with holiness.” (*1 Cor.*, NTC, 224-25).

In verses 15-16, Paul speaks to a situation where an unbelieving spouse wishes to get out of the marriage. Apparently, this too was taking place at

Corinth. Paul once more provides counsel. “But if the unbeliever leaves, let him leave.” Don’t fight it or cause trouble. It is their decision, and you should honor it. When that happens, “A brother or sister is not bound in such cases. God has called you to live in peace.” God has released you from the marriage and you are now free to remarry in the Lord (see v.39). While all commentators and teachers do not believe there is permission to remarry, I think it is the best understanding of the text in light of all the Bible teaches on the issue. Be at peace in your heart and soul because you did all that you could to save the marriage. Your spouse left you. You did not leave them.

I believe verse 16 concludes this discussion with two rhetorical questions [*ESV*, marg. reading of the *CSB*]. First, “Wife, how do you know that you will save your husband?” Second, “Husband, how do you know that you will save your wife?” We cannot be certain whether Paul’s questions are optimistic or pessimistic. However, I like Paul Gardner’s hopeful take,

“Paul uses his *covenantal optimism*, based within the workings and promise of God to encourage the believer to persevere in the marriage if possible. With two identical rhetorical questions, “How do you know ...?” (τί οἶδας), Paul indicates that for both a

Christian wife or a Christian husband, there is a possibility that the unbeliever will be saved. Despite arguments that propose the contrary, it seems likely that Paul would indeed have been hopeful of the possibility of salvation for an unbelieving spouse” (*1 Cor.*, ZECNT, 315).

Con. My friend Paul Tripp wrote a wonderful article entitled: “10 Things You Should Know About Marriage.” It provides a very helpful conclusion to our study of 1 Corinthians 7:1-16.

1. Your marriage is rooted in worship.

No marriage will be unaffected when the people in marriage are seeking to get from the creation what they were only ever meant to get from the Creator. When we celebrate the Creator, we look at one another with wonder and joy. When you look at your spouse and see the Creator’s glory, then you feel blessed by the ways he is different.

2. Marriage will always require work.

Every marriage needs divine wisdom. Every couple will need strength beyond what they have. No husband and wife can do what they were designed to do in marriage without dependency God.

3. Marriage requires regular confession of sin.

Confession is the doorway to growth and change in your relationship. It is essential.

4. A marriage cannot survive without forgiveness.

Forgiveness is the only way to live in an intimate, long-term relationship with another sinner. It is the only way to deal with hurt and disappointment. It is the only way to have hope and confidence restored.

5. Selfishness is the biggest enemy for your marriage.

Your biggest struggle is with the selfishness that tempts and seduces us all. We must all pull this weed again and again, along with all the weeds of destructive words and actions that attach themselves to it.

6. Your marriage needs the church.

Right near you in the body of Christ are couples who have been through what you are now going through.

7. Marriage is the in-between.

God has given us His Word as our guide. Already he has sent his Son to live, die, and rise again for our salvation. Already he has given us his Spirit to live within us. But the world has not yet been restored. Sin has not yet been completely eradicated. We have not yet been formed in the perfect likeness of Jesus.

8. Your marriage exists in a fallen world.

Somehow, somehow, your marriage is touched every day by the brokenness of our world. It is not an accident that you are conducting your marriage in this broken world. It is all a part of God's redemptive plan.

9. You are a sinner married to a sinner.

Many people get married with unrealistic expectations about who they are marrying. Here is the point: you both bring something into your marriage that is destructive to what a marriage needs and must do. That thing is called sin.

10. God is faithful, powerful, and willing to work through your marriage.

You are not alone in your struggle. God is near, so near that in your moment of need you can reach out and touch him because he is not far from each one of us (Act 17:27). The God who determined your address lives there with you and is committed to giving you everything you need (Crossway Articles; 10-1-21); *This article is adapted from Marriage: 6 Gospel Commitments Every Couple Needs to Make by Paul David Tripp.*)

