

Challenges Christians Face

Principles of Marriage

1 Corinthians 7:1-7

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Principles of Marriage

Scripture

We continue our study in *The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians* in a series I am calling *Challenges Christians Face*.

One of the challenges that Christians face is the issue of marriage. Let's learn about this in a message I am calling, "Principles of Marriage."

Let's read 1 Corinthians 7:1-7:

¹ Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman."

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. 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. 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.

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 7:1-7)

Introduction

This is the first time in *The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians* that we see the expression "Now concerning. . ." in verse 1. Chapters 7 – 11 of *The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians* comprise Paul's answer to many challenges that faced the Corinthian Church.

The first of these challenges was the issue of marriage. Pastor John MacArthur notes that marriage was an area in which the Co-

inthians had serious problems. As with their many other problems, much of their marital trouble reflected the pagan and morally corrupt culture in which they lived and from which they had not fully separated. Their culture tolerated fornication, adultery, homosexuality, polygamy, and concubinage.

Juvenal (60-140 AD), the Roman poet, wrote about women who rejected their own sex: they wore helmets, delighted in feats of strength, and with exposed breasts hunted pigs with spears. He also said they wore out their bridal veils with so many marriages.

Interestingly, under Roman law and customs of that day, four types of marriage were practiced.

The first type of marriage was called a *contubernium*, which means “tent companionship.” This was the marriage that was practiced by slaves, who were considered to be subhuman chattel. If a man and woman slave wanted to be married, they might be allowed to live together. The arrangement lasted only as long as the owner permitted. He was perfectly free to separate them, to arrange for other partners, or to sell one or the other. Many of the early Christians were slaves, and some of them had lived—perhaps were still living—in this sort of marital relationship.

The second type of marriage was called *usus*, a form of common law marriage that recognized a couple to be husband and wife after they had lived together for a year.

The third type was called the *coemptio in manum*, in which a father would sell his daughter to a prospective husband.

The fourth type of marriage was called the *confarreatio*. This was the most elevated type of marriage practiced by the upper class of that culture. Our modern Christian marriage ceremony is actually based on this type of marriage. It was adopted by the Roman Catholic Church and used with certain Christian modifications—coming, with little change, into Protestantism through the Reformation. The original ceremony involved participation by both families in the arrangements for the wedding, a matron to accompany the bride and a man to accompany the groom, exchanging of vows, the wearing of a veil by the bride, the giving of a ring

(placed on the third finger of the left hand), a bridal bouquet, and a wedding cake.

In the Roman empire of Paul's day divorce was common, even among those married under the *confarreatio*. It was not impossible for men and women to have been married 20 times or more. An active and vocal feminist movement had also developed. Some wives competed with their husbands in business and even in feats of physical strength. Many were not interested in being housewives and mothers, and by the end of the first century childless marriages were common. Both men and women were determined to live their own lives, regardless of marriage vows or commitments.

The first-century Church had members that had lived together, and were still living together, under all four marriage arrangements. It also had those who had had multiple marriages and divorces. Not only that, but some believers believed that being single and celibate was more spiritual than being married, and they disparaged marriage entirely. Perhaps someone was teaching that sex was "unspiritual" and should be forsaken altogether.

The situation was difficult and perplexing even for mature Christians. For the immature Corinthians it was especially confusing. The great question was: "What do we do now that we are believers? Should we stay together as husband and wife if we are both Christians? Should we get divorced if our spouse is an unbeliever? Should we become, or remain, single? Are we allowed to get married?" The chaos of marital possibilities posed myriad perplexities, which Paul approaches in chapter 7 of this letter.¹

Lesson

In our lesson today, let's examine some principles of marriage that the apostle Paul set down. They are:

1. Marriage is good (7:1).

¹ John MacArthur, *1 Corinthians* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1996), 153-55.

2. Marriage is between one man and one woman (7:2).
3. Marriage protects against the temptations of immorality (7:3-4).
4. Marriage is permanent (7:5).
5. Celibacy is permissible (7:6-7).

I. Marriage Is Good (7:1)

First, marriage is good.

Paul said in verse 1: **“Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: ‘It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.’”**

The Corinthians had written to the apostle Paul about a number of different challenges they were facing. Paul now addressed the first challenge by restating what they had written to him, **“It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.”**

Apparently, there was a lot of disagreement among the Corinthians about how to deal with the issue of marriage. Some believed that it was traditional on the wedding day to declare to the bride that when her husband committed adultery with a prostitute or a woman of easy virtue, it was not a sign that he did not love her, but simply a way of gratifying his passions.² Others said that for the Christian sexual abstinence was the only way to go. The latter view seems to have been gaining momentum, if we are to judge how the matter was addressed to Paul.

The apostle Paul answered the matter in the rest of this section. However, even though he did not explicitly state it in this verse, he clearly implied that marriage is good.

Paul affirmed the principle that God himself declared at creation, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him” (Genesis 2:18). And so God created Eve for Adam. All people need companionship and God ordained marriage as the most fulfilling and common means of companionship.

² D. A. Carson, *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, 4th ed. (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL, USA: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 1 Co 7:1-6.

So, marriage is good.

II. Marriage Is Between One Man and One Woman (7:2)

Second, marriage is between one man and one woman.

Paul said in verse 2: **“But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband.”**

From the very beginning (cf. Genesis 2:18), God affirmed that marriage is between one man and one woman. Paul simply affirmed here what the Bible states repeatedly, **“Each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband.”**

We live in a culture in which a growing number are seeking to redefine marriage. Some people say that marriage should be permitted for any two adults, or for any adults (no matter how many), or for any people (adults and children), and so on.

Regardless of what people in our culture say, or how loudly they shout it, the biblical definition of marriage always has been and always will be defined as between one man and one woman.

So, marriage is between one man and one woman.

III. Marriage Protects Against the Temptations of Immorality (7:3-4)

Third, marriage protects against the temptations of immorality.

Paul said at the start of verse 2: **“But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband.”**

Marriage protects against the temptations of immorality only when it functions properly. That is why the apostle Paul went on to state the marital duties that are placed upon each spouse in a marriage. He said in verse 3: **“The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband.”**

Apparently, couples in Corinth were using sexual intimacy as

some kind of bargaining tool. So, Paul pointed out the obligations that married couples had to marital intimacy.

He also let them know that these obligations were mutual. The husband had a duty of intimacy towards his wife, and the wife had a duty of intimacy towards her husband. Neither spouse had the right—without good cause—to refuse the other. Paul said in verse 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.”**

Unfortunately, these words have been used to justify physical abuse by husbands against their wives. Let me say as emphatically as I can that Paul’s words may *never* be used to force sexual intimacy. There are other Scriptural passages about love and self-protection that place limitations on Paul’s statement in verse 4.

Paul’s point, however, is that properly understood and practiced, marriage protects against the temptations of immorality.

IV. Marriage Is Permanent (7:5)

Fourth, marriage is permanent.

Paul said in verse 5a: **“Do not deprive one another. . . .”**

He was, of course, speaking about intimacy in marriage. But, he is also indicating that marriage is to be a permanent relationship between a man and a woman. Obviously, when the marriage breaks down, for whatever reason, there is a deprivation not only of the intimacy but of the relationship as well.

However, there is one exception to not depriving one another. Paul said in verse 5b: **“Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer.”**

In other words, there are three conditions that must be met in order for a spouse not to be intimate:

1. There must be mutual agreement by both spouses.
2. The deprivation is only for a limited time.
3. Both spouses are to devote themselves to prayer.

Throughout the Old Testament there were times of special religious devotion by the people of God. These times included prayer and fasting, and sometimes temporary sexual abstinence (e.g., 1 Samuel 21:4-5). Paul stated that this practice of temporary sexual abstinence was to be carried over into the New Testament period as well.

Sometimes a couple faces a major crisis or burden that may require concentrated and focused prayer time. Perhaps a serious illness, catastrophe, difficulty, or opportunity may cause a couple to agree to spend extra time in prayer about the matter. That is the *only* time when a couple may agree not to be intimate.

Once the agreed-upon time is over, however, the couple must return to normal intimacy. Paul put it this way in verse 5c: “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. . .**” Why? “. . . so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.” The longer a married couple is not intimate, the greater the risk that one spouse will fall into a sinful sexual relationship.

Before I move on to my final point, I do want to note that Scripture gives several reasons for marriage. These reasons are:

1. Marriage is for *procreation*. God commanded Adam and Eve to “be fruitful and multiply” (Genesis 1:28). God intends for mankind to reproduce itself.
2. Marriage is also for *pleasure*. Proverbs speaks of a man rejoicing in the wife of his youth (Proverbs 5:18-19), and the Song of Solomon highlights the pleasures of marital love.
3. Marriage is a *partnership*. Woman was created for man to be “a helper fit for him” (Genesis 2:18). Friendship between husband and wife is one of the key ingredients of a good marriage.
4. Marriage is a *picture* of the church. Husbands are to have authority over and to love their wives as Christ has authority over and loves the church, while wives are to

submit to their husbands as the church submits to Christ (Ephesians 5:23-32).

5. Marriage is for *purity*. It protects from sexual immorality by meeting the need for physical fulfillment.³

These are the reasons that Scripture gives for marriage. And, we can also add that marriage is permanent.

V. Celibacy Is Permissible (7:6-7)

And fifth, celibacy is permissible.

Paul said in verses 6-7: **“Now as a concession, not a command, I say this. 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.”**

Commentator Richard Pratt says that not much is known about Paul’s marital history, though it is likely that he was married at one time because marriage was required of rabbis in his day. If Paul was an ordained rabbi, he must have been married for a while, but nothing is known about what happened to his wife. She may have died, or she may have left him when he converted to Christianity. Whatever the case, Paul was single and free from burning sexual passion when he wrote this letter, and he admitted that he saw advantages in this condition.⁴

Paul recognized that God does not call all people to singleness. He apparently did not struggle with self-control regarding his sexuality. He affirmed that **each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another**. In other words, God blesses one person with the gift of singleness, and he blesses another with the gift of marriage.

Sometimes young people wonder whether or not they have the gift of singleness or the gift of marriage. How can one know?

It seems that the person who has the gift of singleness has a

³ John MacArthur, *I Corinthians* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1996), 156.

⁴ Richard L. Pratt, Jr., vol. 7, *I & II Corinthians*, Holman New Testament Commentary; Holman Reference (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 114.

general sense of contentment with his or her status. That is not to say that there are no struggles with one's state as a single person. But Paul seems to suggest that a person with the gift of singleness has less of a struggle with self-control in terms of sexual desires. That is why he said in verses 8-9, "To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single as I am. But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion." A person with the gift of singleness does not seem to struggle with passion so much and is able to exercise self-control, whereas a person with the gift of marriage struggles with his or her passion. And so it is better for that person to get marry than to burn with passion.

But, I shall say more about that next time.

So, celibacy is permissible.

Conclusion

Some people love to drive old cars. I know someone who spends lots of time and money renovating and driving around in an antique automobile. He enjoys it, and doesn't mind the attention he gets from people.

We have probably all seen people dressed up in costumes from the earlier decades of the last century as they drive about with big smiles on their faces. Meanwhile, modern, faster cars line up behind them waiting for the opportunity to pass and go on their way unhindered by these throw-backs to yesteryear.

Let us face it. When Christians today take seriously the teaching of this chapter and apply them to marriage, they seem as out of touch with the modern world as antique car enthusiasts. People gawk at us, waiting for us to move our jalopies so they may go on their way unhindered.

Despite the attitudes of the world, we must look at Christian marriage not as a jalopy but as a precious antique, a treasure from the past. In the beginning God ordained marriage and commanded it in Scripture. This gift from God is not to be despised, but che-

rished as the blessing of our Creator.

Knowing the great value of marriage, we must work hard to preserve what God has so clearly given to us in Scripture. Let us affirm in word and deed the principles of marriage that Paul gave to us in our lesson for today. These principles are:

1. Marriage is good (7:1).
 2. Marriage is between one man and one woman (7:2).
 3. Marriage protects against the temptations of immorality (7:3-4).
 4. Marriage is permanent (7:5).
 5. Celibacy is permissible (7:6-7).
- May God help us to put these principles into practice. Amen.

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*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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PRAAYER:

Our God, we live in a day in which the principles of marriage are attacked on every side. Teach us your truth regarding marriage and grant us strength to delight in the treasure you give us.

And for this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

BENEDICTION:

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

CHARGE:

Now, brothers and sisters, go and affirm that marriage is good, marriage is between one man and one woman, marriage protects against the temptations of immorality, marriage is permanent, and celibacy is permissible.