

God's Design for Marriage: 1 Cor 7:1-24

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[0 : 00] 24 verses together, and can I say as well that as we go through a topic and a subject like this, it probably raises more questions than it does answers.

So we're going to try and get through all that we can, but please, I say this often, but I think I just stress this a bit more that if there are questions from this morning's talk or anything that you want to discuss through, then please feel free to do that with me afterwards.

We're going to ask for God's help. We're going to pray. So let's do that now. Father, we thank you for that faithful, loyal love that you show towards us.

And we are continually in need of that love, a love that cares for us in the very best possible way. And we know that your word, your truth, is what is right and best for us, whether we are single or whether we are married.

[1 : 16] And so we pray that your truth would speak into our hearts, inform our minds, that we would become a holy people, a holy people in our marriages, a holy people in our life, that we may honor you and reflect you in our relationships one to another.

So please help us, we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, let me start with a story. The names are fictional, but the story is true.

Laura felt lonely and bitter. She and Andy had been married for a few years. When they first met, it truly was love at first sight.

They loved being together. And so when Andy popped the question, it was her dreams come true. She thought back to her wedding day. It had been amazing.

Friends and family celebrating their new life together. All their longings fulfilled as they set up home as husband and wife. But all that seemed a long time ago now.

[2 : 36] The once cosy home was now full of regret and anger. Laura was controlling. Andy had met someone else.

How had it all gone so wrong? They sat opposite each other. Andy in self-denial. Laura in tears of self-pity.

Now, if you're married here this morning, you might be able to relate to Laura and Andy in some way. Marriage is a wonderful gift from God to us, but no one has ever said marriage is easy.

The church in Corinth, like us, also faced their marriage problems. So have a look back at chapter 6, verse 16. This explains what some of the marriage relationships were like, or some of the behaviours.

Chapter 6, verse 16. Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body? For it is said the two will become one flesh.

[3 : 50] You see, it was very common for a husband at that time to have a wife who would give him children, he would have a slave who would do his work, and prostitutes for his sexual pleasure.

And that was the arrangement. And sadly, this sexual immorality was not just part of city life in Corinth. It had become part of Christian married life within the church.

And as the church reflected on these behaviours, some went with that kind of lifestyle, while other people reacted what seems to be very strongly.

So rather than this liberal approach to marriage and sex, they instead adopted an abstinence and separation approach to marriage and sex.

So there were these two big ideas going on in response to the sexual immorality that seemed to be rooting itself in the lives of believers within the church family.

[5 : 02] So there were some who thought that, well, if you were married, it was better to abstain from sex altogether. So have a look at chapter 7, verse 1.

Paul is writing to the church. He says, Now for matters you wrote about. And here's one of the things they wrote to Paul about. And they said, it's a quote, It is good for a man not to marry. Or better translated, it is good not to have a sexual relationship in marriage. So there were some who thought it was better to abstain completely.

On the other side, there were those who thought that, well, if you were married, it was actually better to separate. So verse 10, chapter 7, verse 10, To the married I give this command. Not I, but the Lord, a wife must not separate from her husband. So some were saying we should abstain. Others were saying we should just separate.

[6 : 07] Now from my experience in life, which isn't very long, but just in talking with people, when marriages get into difficulty, this is exactly what seems to happen.

People abstain. And they in turn separate. But marriage is holy. It is a wonderful gift from God. And marriage is set apart for God. And so we should seek to follow God's design as it reflects something of who he is. And in the first part of chapter 7, we're going to see why we should not abstain and why we should not separate.

So here's the first big heading. First, marriage and sex. Why abstinence is wrong. I remember babysitting for two young boys.

Many years ago, their dad was the local Presbyterian minister and we were very good friends of the family. Well, anyway, on this particular evening, I could see that the older brother was pushing the younger brother to ask me a question.

[7 : 22] And their concern was their mum was pregnant. Well, when it dawned on them that their parents needed to have sex for this to happen, the elder brother, he was absolutely horrified and he blurted out to me and he said, but my dad's a minister.

Well, I'm a minister too and sex is not wrong. It's a beautiful gift from God, but only in the context of a married relationship between one man and one woman.

So first, as we've been seeing, God says there is no sex outside of marriage. We've seen this through chapter 5 and chapter 6.

Sexual immorality was not just part of city life, it had become rooted within church life and within married life. And so in response to all of this, look at the end of chapter 6, just the last couple of lines.

He says, you are not your own, so you're not free to do whatever you like in life. You were bought at a price. Jesus died for you. He rescued you from a life of immorality to live a holy life for God.

[8 : 34] Therefore, honour God with your body. Now, if we're going to honour God with our body, that means we're to follow God's good design for marriage.

marriage, and God's good design for marriage is clearly put right at the beginning of the story of the Bible in Genesis 2, 24, where God says, a man will leave his father and mother, be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.

And that becoming one flesh means that they become together as one through their sexual relationship, united to each other, and one with each other.

It seals their marriage commitment. Now, while God is very clear that there is no sex outside of marriage, on a positive note, and in contrast, God says, there should be no marriage without sex. And this is where it begins to answer the question. So, chapter 7, verse 1. He says, now for the matters you wrote about, it is good for a man not to marry.

[9 : 48] So, some were saying, it's good, it's better for us not to have a sexual relationship in marriage. Well, nothing could be further from the truth.

Sex is crucial for growing and nurturing the marriage. Three things we're going to look at here. first, sex protects the marriage union.

Look at verse 2. But since there is so much immorality, there was so much wrong behaviour, husbands in particular carrying on the way that they were, he says to those who were married, each man should have his own wife, should have a sexual relationship with his own wife, not anybody else, and each woman her own husband.

You see, the marriage relationship is exclusive. And so, their sexual relationship is exclusive. And this is what actually keeps husband and wife together.

So, look down at verse 5. He says, do not deprive each other except by mutual consent and for a time.

[11:09] So, it must be agreed so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Now, I think the implication there is that as married couples we should be praying together. Praying together to protect the marriage relationship.

and the concern here is he's saying that don't deprive each other sexually because by depriving one another all you do is you drive a wedge of division between each other which causes the marriage relationship to break apart and it could lead to temptation.

So, look at the rest of verse 5. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self control.

Now, while this should never ever be an excuse sexual inactivity can be one reason for a husband or a wife leaving and having an affair with somebody else or causing the marriage relationship to drift apart.

It can cause division rather than unite. Verse 6, he says, I say this as a concession not as a command.

[12:29] In other words, if you must abstain, if you think that's important for you to do, make sure you are very, very careful in how you do that because it can cause division.

It could break the marriage relationship. So, first of all, sex protects the marriage union. It is between one husband and one wife together and it is crucial that it is kept in that way.

Second, sex serves the other's needs. So, look at verse 3. The husband should fulfil his marital duty to his wife and likewise the wife to her husband.

Now, again, when husband and wife get married, they are giving themselves over to the other person. With my body, I serve my wife and she in turn serves me.

So, sex isn't something that we demand from each other. That's very selfish. That makes marriage all about my wants and my desires and my pleasure.

[13:42] it turns the other person into an object of self-gratification. No, sex is something we don't take or we don't look at something as getting.

It is something we give in loving service to fulfil the needs of our husband or wife. So, it is loving service. And I think that should be a good answer to verse 9.

So, have a look at verse 9. All the hot-blooded young males read this verse and they go, but if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion.

So, that's why I need to get married. Well, that must be balanced very carefully with what we've just looked at in verse 3. It's not about getting or taking and fulfilling my desires and my wants.

It's about loving service to fulfil the needs of our husband or wife. Third thing, sex creates a deeper intimacy.

[14:54] This is all in relation to protecting and keeping that bond of marriage together. So, look at verse 4. The wife's body does not belong to her alone, but also to her husband.

In the same way, the husband's body does not belong to him alone, but also to his wife. Now, how radical and revolutionary is that in today's culture? We all say it's my body to do with whatever I want to do.

No, we belong to one another. And sex is deeply intimate. And within that intimacy it is very, very vulnerable.

My wife is saying to me, my body is for you and for you alone. And the husband is saying, my body is for you and for you alone. And together it's not just about being physically naked, but it's about being emotionally naked.

We are entrusting ourselves to one another and giving access to the other in the most deepest possible way. And in this way it grows trust, it builds ties, that together creates intimacy.

[16:12] So you see, sex is a good gift from God. Contrary to what the world says, God is not against sex. He is for it within the context of that loving relationship between a husband and wife.

And it is, yes, of course, from other scriptures, it is for creating new life, love, but it is also for the growing and the nurturing of that holy marriage relationship.

But it's not always easy, is it? Verse 7, he says, I wish that all men were as I am. Paul was single at the time. We're not sure if he was ever married, we don't know that, but at this time it seems that he was single.

But each one has his own gift, from God. One has this gift, another has that. Some are single, he's saying, and that's a gift from God.

It may change in time. Others are married, and that is a gift from God. Now, in the context of marriage, if we are married, we should be very careful to nurture this special gift that marriage is. [17 : 27] It is a gift from God to us, not to be abused or used as we want, so we must nurture that gift. And every marriage will at some stage struggle, and they will struggle sexually, and it has the potential to tear marriages apart, and the solution to that is not abstinence, but a learning to serve, and a learning to give.

love. And that takes gentleness and care, and that's why I think in verse five it talks about prayer, the need for husbands and wives to be praying together, and making that a part of your life together.

So if we're here this morning, and we're married, and we struggle in this whole area, don't be embarrassed, don't be afraid to ask for help or for support, nurture that holy gift of marriage, it is God's means of keeping that relationship intact.

So that's the first big question or first big answer. The next one he looks at is marriage and unbelievers, so why separation is wrong. You see, marriage isn't just an exclusive relationship between one man and one woman, it's a lifelong relationship, and this applies whether our spouse is a believer, a follower of Christ, or is an unbeliever.

First, marriage is for life. Look at verse 10. To the married I give this command, not I but the Lord, so he's quoting here, he's applying the teaching of Jesus.

[19 : 21] He says, 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.

Can you remember what Jesus spoke about when he quoted God's design in Genesis? Do you remember his words? What God has joined together, let man not separate.

So it's to be a lifelong union, now sadly, there will be times when we do deal with separation or divorce, and we're going to come to that in a moment, so if that's a question in your mind right now, just hold on to it, and we'll come back to it.

But for now, I don't want us to lose the focus that marriage is lifelong, and the reason that it is lifelong is this, it can lead to the salvation of an unbeliever.

And this is true in two ways. First, it can lead to the salvation of an unbelieving spouse. So this is thinking of a marriage relationship where one of them is a Christian and the other one is not.

[20 : 41] So first, marriage can save your unbelieving spouse. So look at verse 12. To the rest I say this, so those who are in that married relationship, I, not the Lord, so he's no longer quoting what Jesus has said, but Paul's words are just as authoritative as Jesus.

He says, 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 the same is true in the opposite.

So if a woman has a husband who is not a believer, and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. You see, some people may take the view that, well, look, if my husband or wife, they're not Christians, then it's not good for me.

It's not good for me and my relationship with God. So I need to kind of get out of this relationship and find myself a Christian husband or a Christian wife. If I'm really going to grow as a Christian, then I need to leave them.

And I think that's kind of what some of the thinking was within these marriages in Corinth. But there's actually a greater purpose than our own spiritual life.

[21 : 57] And that greater purpose is the salvation of our unbelieving husband or wife. So look at verse 14. Follow with me through these, because they're quite technical and we need to follow along.

So verse 14. For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband.

Now sanctified, we've come across that word before in Corinthians. It means to be made holy before God, to be pure and blameless in his sight. and it also means to be set apart for God.

So God has won you over and now you live for him. You're set apart for his ways. So as God looks upon the marriage of a believing person and an unbeliever together, God looks upon that marriage as sanctified.

He's saying that marriage is holy. It's pure. I recognise that marriage. Marriage is good. It's a gift of God to you. And what's the implication?

[23 : 10] Well it doesn't mean that an unbeliever is saved simply because they are married to a believer. So just because an unbeliever is with a believer doesn't mean they're going to become a Christian.

But what it does mean is that it provides the opportunity for salvation and that salvation is very real because they are married to a believer.

So look at verse 16. So how do you know wife whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know husband whether you will save your wife?

So the purpose he's saying of not separating but staying together is the salvation of your unbelieving spouse.

and it's applied in a second way to unbelieving children. So marriage can also save your unbelieving children.

[24 : 18] So look at verse 14. We'll read the whole of it again. Verse 14. For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband.

children otherwise your children would be unclean. But as it is they are holy. So I think the same idea is being applied here to children.

It's a great privilege it's a wonderful privilege for a child to grow up in a home where both parents believe. I thank God that that's how my life started.

A mum who's going to pray for you. a dad who's going to read the Bible with you. And if that's you here this morning mums and dads can I just encourage you to invest that time in praying for your children and reading with them.

That is the most wonderful gift you could ever give to your children. And through the believing parents they get to hear the good news of Christ.

[25 : 29] Christ. And the same is true if only one of the parents believes or if only one of the parents is a Christian. So in that sense look at the end of verse 14 he describes the children of that married relationship as holy.

In other words they're also set apart for God. They're under the care of a loving parent who can pray for them and teach them the good news of Christ.

You may not have the support of your spouse in doing so but there is nothing to stop you praying for them and encouraging them. They are in a very special unique relationship with their believing mum or dad because through them they get to see and hear the good news of Christ.

So the purpose of not separating but staying together including with your children is salvation of their lives.

Now sadly sometimes marriages do come to an end before death do us part. So look at verse 15.

[26 : 46] But if the unbeliever leaves let him do so. a believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances.

God has called us to live in peace. Now while we should always seek to do all we can to keep the marriage together we cannot make an unbeliever stay in the marriage.

It's sad and sometimes the believer who is left is the one who is there also with the children and in that situation it requires the church to gather round in loving support to care for that family.

To watch out for their practical physical emotional all the needs that they may have. It's the responsibility of the church to care for them. So the clear teaching is that it seems to be through this is that marriage is lifelong.

It is for life until death do us part. And we should not separate or divorce because marriage can lead to the salvation of your unbelieving spouse and children.

[28 : 01] But there's still the issue of verse 11 isn't there? I wonder if you noticed it. Let's read verse 10 again. To the married I give this command.

A wife must not separate from her husband. but if she does. So it seems at this point there are circumstances when separation or divorce may be necessary.

In Matthew's gospel Jesus dealt with this question with people. And in that context in Matthew chapter 19 Jesus spoke about unfaithfulness in marriage as the only reason.

Now that unfaithfulness is either the husband or wife not being faithful to the marriage relationship that they've committed to each other. An unfaithfulness in terms of well maybe they've gone off and had an affair and they're now living with somebody else.

or maybe because of abuse whether that's physical abuse or verbal or psychological abuse. So living with an unfaithful spouse in that particular circumstance well they may need to separate for their physical protection for their mental well being for the care of their children that might be necessary.

[29 : 37] And again how the church responds is crucial. If a marriage does separate we need to gather round not in condemnation not in pointing fingers but in grace.

Any separation or any divorce is painful for anybody and it can leave people with an enormous amount of guilt and shame whether they've played no part in it at all.

And there's a certain stigma that's attached to it that it is hard for people. And in that context we need to be holding out the hope of the gospel to point them to our saviour Jesus Christ who not only forgives all of our sins but he's the one who heals our hurts.

Who gathers us in love and compassion and cares for us immensely. So we need to be careful how we think about people rather than push them away in condemnation and judgment we need to encourage and love and support.

But as we said none of these things are easy and it isn't something we should rush into. Every effort should be made to restore and where possible reconcile that relationship.

[31 : 06] But let's not lose the big picture here of what he's saying. Marriage is for life and it's for the saving purpose of our unbelieving family.

So marriage and sex why abstinence is wrong marriage and unbelievers why separation is wrong and then third marriage and contentment our need of grace and how if we are married we all need God's grace.

So look at verse 17. This is really a kind of a conclusion he brings these two big ideas together. Verse 17 nevertheless so whatever your married relationship is like look at what he says each one should retain the place in life that the Lord has assigned to him and to which God has called him. This is the rule I lay down in all the churches. Verse 20 each one should remain in the situation which he was in when God called him.

Verse 24 brothers each man as responsible to God should remain in the situation God called him to. So I think it's quite clear isn't it if you are a Christian and you are married remain in that married relationship.

[32 : 42] Now it's so easy to say those words isn't it? Because you may be married to an unbeliever and that can be very very hard. you may be married to a husband who has been unfaithful and that is painful.

You may be married to a wife who's really difficult and controlling and that is hard. So what are you telling me Johnny to say remain in that married relationship?

Well it's easy for you you're not in my situation. how are we meant to remain? Well rather than be looking for a way out so rather than running in that direction we need to focus our eyes up to God's grace and his grace to us in our lives.

First he gives us grace for obedience. again pay attention here follow along carefully they're not easy verses but we'll make our way through.

So verse 18 was a man already circumcised when he was called? Well he should not become uncircumcised. Was a man uncircumcised when he was called?

[34 : 11] Well he should not be circumcised. Well I scratched my head many times over this like what's circumcision got to do marriage. What's all that about? Well those who were circumcised were Jews.

Those who were uncircumcised were Gentiles. So he's saying well just as a Jew doesn't have to change his identity to become a Christian and just as a Gentile doesn't need to change his identity to become a Christian.

Well he's saying to those who are married you don't need to change your marriage relationship to change your relationship with God. You're in that relationship with God.

So you don't need to go changing your relationship at all. Verse 19 circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God's commands is what counts.

So the important thing about our marriage relationship is not trying to change it it's actually about obeying God's commands in the relationship because God's commands are actually a gift of grace.

[35 : 23] They're not here to harm us or to cause difficulty for us. God has given us the gift of marriage and he knows what's right and best for each one of us and so he gives us his commands

and he says walk in them because they will help you to remain whatever circumstance your marriage is.

You see God's grace gives me the patience to live with my unbelieving spouse. God's grace gives me the ability to forgive my unfaithful husband.

God's grace motivates me to serve my wife who may be difficult. You see God's grace works in us this enabling to obey and to live out what God has called us to be so we can be committed and be content.

Verse 20 So each one should remain in the situation he was in when God called him. But there's also the grace of belonging.

Verse 21 Again he brings another illustration. He says were you a slave when you were called? Well don't let it trouble you although if you can gain your freedom do so.

[36 : 47] And you're thinking well again what's that got to do with marriage? Well again he's saying something similar he says whether you were a slave or whether you were a freed person that's not the issue guys.

That's not what matters. what really matters for you in your marriage relationship at the end of verse 22 he says is that you are Christ's slave.

That you belong to Christ. That you're in relationship with him and that you belong to him. So our marriage relationship whatever it is like and no matter how difficult it is our marriage relationship is not the most important thing.

the world defines us by our relationships whether I'm single or whether I'm married whether I have children or don't have children whether I'm divorced or whether I'm not.

The world defines us in those terms. But he's saying look the most important thing for you is that you belong to Christ. Verse 23 you were bought at a price.

[37 : 57] Do not become slaves of men. Do not become shaped by the world's opinions of you. Christ in his love and in his grace came to you and died for you.

He loves you. He treasures you. He cares for you. He pursued you with a faithful loyal love. He says so that relationship is what counts.

And it's only as we understand that relationship with God that we can continue on in our relationships with each other. You see in his grace God is eternally faithful and loyal where we have been unfaithful to him.

In his grace God's love does not change or disappoint when we disappoint him and are not faithful in our love towards him. In his grace God holds nothing back but continually gives to us as we need when we withhold our heart from him.

So do not let the world define us or relationships define us. Rather let the relationship we have with God define our marriage relationships.

[39 : 20] So verse 24, brothers and sisters, each one as responsible to God should remain in the situation God called him to.

Marriage is holy. It is a gift from God to his people. It should be treasured. It should be nurtured. It should be cared for. Why? Because it reflects the very nature of God to those around us. and as people look in on us they will see a reflection of the beautiful relationship between God and his people.

It is hard. And so we pray and together as a church we support each other and we encourage each other that we may go on well as we should in our married lives.

Let's just take time to pray together now.