

1 Corinthians 7:1-11

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- [0 : 0 0] False dichotomy. This is a technical term in logic by which a premise is stated and an assumption is made about its opposite premise.
- So because of one, there's this opposite premise and those are your only two options. For example, Republican-Democrat. If I say I am not a Republican and you make the assumption that therefore he must be a Democrat, that's a false dichotomy.
- Because there are a lot of other options, you know, libertarian, green, independent, etc., etc. False dichotomy. I think that's what we actually come to in 7.1, if you look at it with me.
- Now, concerning the matters about which you wrote, it is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman. 1 Corinthians 7.1 Paul is turning to a response to a letter they've written him.
- And they've raised a question. They've been listening to his teaching. You know, his last letter we saw in 5.9, avoid sexually immoral people.
- [1 : 2 1] They've probably been paying attention for the last two chapters in which this idea of sexual immorality has come up again and again and again. He accused some of them. You know, there's sexual immorality in the Corinthian church that's unlike even what the pagans have going on.
- That's 5.1. He's landed on this really strong imperative in chapter 6. Flee sexual immorality. And so they've been listening. They say, we get it, Paul.
- We get it. Sexual immorality, bad. Sex, bad. We get it. And that's the false dichotomy. They assume that because sexual immorality is bad, therefore, all sex must be bad.
- And Paul, having received this letter, having received this misunderstanding about what he's saying, I mean, and it's a natural misunderstanding. There are adult converts in Corinth who, you know, this idea of being united with Christ is a question.
- All right, what does that mean for marriage then? They assume then, well, like the Platonists, all sex must be bad. And so Paul has a tricky task in front of him.
- [2 : 3 6] He has to deal with sex and celibacy in a way that breaks down this false dichotomy. And so we get from him the three intricately woven together responses in verses 2 through 11.
- Let's look at the first response, verses 2 to 7. We learned from verse 1 that some amount of the Christians in Corinth thought, okay, sexual immorality, bad.
- Sex must be bad. And this is where Paul starts. He begins by making a strong defense of the rightful place of sex between husband and wife.
- Notice how he starts his response in 7.2. But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, imminently practical Paul, if you're not having sex with your spouse, you're going to be tempted to have sex with somebody else.
- Imminently practical Paul begins with that acknowledgement. And then his remedy is expressed here with remarkable redundancy. Look at how it goes.

[3 : 44] Each man should have his own wife. Have is a euphemism, a well-recognized euphemism for have sexual relations with his own wife. Each woman her own husband. The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband.

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.

Do not deprive one another. Each man should have his own wife. Each wife her own husband. They should not have a mistress.

They should not have prostitutes. They should not have multiple wives. That all falls under the category of porneia, that idea of sexual immorality that we've been looking at in the last couple of chapters that Dave really explored in the sermon last week.

The concept, not porneia. In the sermon last week. No. Sex is good. It has a place between man and wife.

[4 : 52] But notice the strength of it. This three-fold redundancy. The husband should have his own wife. He should give his wife her conjugal rights.

He should give himself to her authority. Three ways he makes it clear. That last one especially is important. He's moved from have a wife to this contractual language of give her her rights, meaning physical conjugal rights, to authority.

It's a word he used back in chapter 6, verse 12. To the rest I say, whoops, yeah, not the Lord, that if anybody has a, am I in the right, no, I'm not, I'm in the wrong chapter.

All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be dominated by anything. Dominated there is the word authority.

So Paul is saying, it's not just that you have authority over your spouse's body, but rather you give yourself up to their authority, that is, to their domination, their physical domination, in the same kind of way that you would give yourself up to the Lord in every way.

[6 : 07] So Paul lands on this, his strongest language, and his point is clear. You give yourself physically to your spouse. Notice also there, though, that the verbs are giving verbs, not demanding verbs.

This is actually really important. In a place like Corinth, where they're wrestling with freedom and what's right and wrong, now that we're all Christians, there's no sense here of demand.

It's self-sacrificial giving to one's spouse. I think it's related to an argument he's been making from the beginning of the book, that Christ gave himself up.

He gave his own body up for the church. And that's the tone here that Paul adopts to talk about sexual intimacy between husband and wife. He made his argument strongly.

And in verse 5, he begins to anticipate a little bit of pushback, I think. And he makes a concession. He acknowledges that, okay, fine, there are some situations in which it is right for a husband and wife to abstain.

[7 : 28] Makes sense. But notice his equivocal language. Accept, perhaps, his limitations for a time, by mutual agreement.

Not one spouse demands from the other that we must stop for some time. By mutual agreement. His logic, that it's for a matter of limited time.

Limited time. And it's so that you may be given to greater devotion in the Lord, to the Lord in prayer. It's not any old reason.

And look at the definite end there. But you must come together again, in verse 6. He acknowledges in verse 6, which actually, I'm sorry, in verse 5, he acknowledges that they must come back together again.

And verse 6 points us back to verse 5, that this was a concession, not really something he generally desired for them. And so, in verse 7, Paul states, sort of telegraphing a point he's about to make, that he wishes everybody were free of the responsibilities of marriage.

[8 : 49] But he calls marriage a gift, just like he calls singleness a gift. Some are married, some are single, and this is actually, I think, the theological principle for the whole chapter. Some are married, some are single, both are gifts.

They are actually literally charismatic gifts. Remembering back to 1.7, that the Corinthian church is not lacking in any gifts. His first response is a strong defense of the rightful place of sex within marriage, that this was God's design, as he referred back to in chapter 6.

With a second response in verses 8 and 9, Paul turns his defense to singleness. He landed on his first point, that marriage is a gift as a singleness, but he telegraphed this idea in verse 7, that singleness is a gift.

I wish that all were as I myself am, meaning single. So, verses 8 and 9 should actually not surprise us at all. 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. Why should somebody remain single?

[10 : 15] Question I'm sure they were wondering. He doesn't really say explicitly here. Though, from what we saw in the last chapter and some of the phrases he's going to use later in this chapter, it seems that his chief concern is for gospel productivity and freedom from the concerns of family in a difficult age.

This, of course, is a noble aspiration for singleness. Notice, though, it's also celibate singleness. The celibacy part of singleness is a problem, he says.

Get married. Of course, with this verse, Paul frequently gets a bad reputation as being anti-marriage. That reputation doesn't really hold up if you read the text.

I mean, given what he's just said about marriage, given what he says about marriage later in this chapter and elsewhere in this book, given what he says about marriage in his other letters, he's obviously pro-marriage.

He has a very high view of marriage. But remember, his consistent concern from chapter 5 has been sexual immorality. And so it makes sense, then, when talking to single people, that if they are struggling with sexual immorality, this idea of pornea, then marriage is a remedy.

[11 : 35] It's not the only reason one gets married, though. This isn't an exhaustive comment. There are other good reasons to get married. But he's speaking to single people who are suffering from a kind of temptation to sexual immorality.

And for them, it might actually make sense to get married. This brings us to his third response.

Having strongly defended singleness now, he once again anticipates this tendency of the Corinthian church to take things to their extreme, to ask good questions, but to frame those questions in a sense of the most extreme example one can imagine.

And so, that group of people who are thinking, well, sexual immorality is bad, therefore, let's just give up on sex altogether, are now taking it a step further, I think, in Paul's mind.

There's this possibility that, okay, well, if sex is bad, then let's just give up on marriage, too. And that's what he addresses here, I think, in verses 10 and 11.

[12 : 49] To the married I give this charge, not I, but the Lord. The wife should not separate from her husband, but if she does, she should remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband.

And the husband should not divorce his wife. Seems fairly straightforward. Paul was certainly aware of Jesus' teaching on this, some tradition of Jesus' teaching on this, because he actually attributes this to the Lord.

He's saying, I'm not even bringing my own teaching right now, I'm actually bringing you something directly from Jesus Christ. And we have, actually, three instances in the Gospels in which Jesus addresses this.

So, Paul was, I mean, a Pharisee, so certainly aware of the exception Moses gave in Deuteronomy 24, possibly even aware of the exception that Jesus defends for Moses in Matthew 19, which we read earlier.

But he doesn't give room for the exception here. He doesn't focus on the exception. I think, in part, because he knows the Corinthian tendency to take the exception and run with it. He, he gives him, he gives him a word from the law.

[14 : 04] Don't dissolve your marriages. The wife leaves, which was her only recourse, leaving behind home and assets.

That marriage is still intact. So her only options, reconciliation, or celibacy. for the man.

Don't divorce your wife. He actually had, had legal recourse to get her removed, keeping the assets in the home. But even there, men, don't divorce your wives.

And so, so barring the one exception that our Lord gives us, the command, which Paul focuses on, not that exception, is clear.

If marriage must be broken, celibate singleness, or reconciliation, are the only options. Anything else, outside of the one exception, is porneia.

[15 : 08] It's sexual immorality. So there's Paul's three responses. A defense of sex within marriage, a defense of celibate singleness, and now a defense of the permanence of marriage.

He gives us a true dichotomy to replace the false dichotomy. It's not sexual immorality or no sex at all.

It's joyful, abundant sex within marriage, or joyful, abundant celibacy within singleness. What's this mean for us?

Well, he's given us a blueprint here, I think, of how to understand sexual ethics in a modern age. Corinth wasn't all that different than Chicago is today.

People want out of marriages all the time, for good reasons and for bad. people certainly don't want to give themselves to celibacy when single.

[16 : 21] Culturally speaking, that idea is gone. It's antiquated. And yet, Paul maintains that from God's design of marriage, these are our options.

our Lord, who gave himself sacrificially for the church, his body, models for us, I think, a right way to understand sex and celibacy.

It's sacrificial. And so, to use the words of Jesus in Mark chapter 8, we must deny ourselves and take up our crosses and follow him, living within the design of sexuality that God has given us since creation.

Let me pray. Our Father in Heaven, we come before you grateful for the way you designed both marriage and singleness, giving us these gifts for our good and your glory.

And the way that your Son gave himself sacrificially and humbled himself, help us to live joyfully within the definitions of marriage and singleness and within the good design of the sex and celibacy that you have given us.

[17 : 36] I pray this in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.