An Outline for Sanity

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[0:00] The epistle which was read this morning is a tough epistle in the sense that it goes against the grain of much of the types of things that would be said in our culture.

Those of you who are our guests this morning, in this church we have the habit now of preaching through different books of the Bible. And some long books like John, which we're going to begin just after Easter, that'll probably take us four or five years to complete, unless Jesus comes back soon before that's over or through age or infirmity, or it wouldn't be age because I'm not that old, or infirmity, I can't finish it.
It's one of the blessings of being a pastor in a church for a long time is you can undertake to say, let's preach the gospel of John and we'll take four or five years to do it. And 1 Corinthians is going to take us two or three years.
And so we've already gone through the first six chapters and today and throughout Lent we'll be looking at chapter 7, 8, 9, and I think we get about halfway into chapter 10, but I can't quite remember where we get to.
And so that's why we're looking at this text today. And we're going to really be looking at the first 16 verses in particular. And these are, this is an outline of sanity.
[1:27] It's an outline of sanity to those who are married or those who are widowed. It is an outline of sanity. But before we look at the text, I want us to look at two other passages in the Bible.

And the first one is, please turn in your Bibles to page 991. Page 900, sorry, page 990, 990 in the Bible.
This week, Paul's outline of sanity is towards those words of Christian wisdom to those who are married or those who are widowed.
And next week, it's words of sanity to those who are single, primarily. And, but before we look, and I'm going to say the same passage next week as well as a bit of a context for this.
Page 991, 1 Corinthians chapter 6. And I'm going to read verses 9 to 11. Here's the verse.
[2:50] Here's the thing. And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of God.

This is something which Paul wrote just very shortly before the passage that we're going to look at today. And it provides a really important word of caution as we look.
Christianity is for sinners. If you don't think you're a sinner, like we welcome you here and we're really glad that you're, you want to be with us and you're our guest this morning.
But if I was to ask all of the sinners in the room to stand up, you'll notice that I'm already standing. I'm standing before you are. And Christianity is not for those who are perfect.
It's not for the smug or the self-righteous. It is a great error and a great tragedy that often Christians become smug and self-righteous.
[3:53] But Christianity is for those who have sinned and who continue to sin. And one of the things which is wonderful about this text is that I just read is that the text that we're going to read in a moment in 1 Corinthians 7 and next week when we read it on singleness, it's going to bring to our attention for many of us, not for all of us, but for many of us, things that we have done in the past and maybe things that we are even considering doing or have just done very, very recently that are wrong.

And it's important for us to understand that, you know, we can't change our past. The things that we have done in the past, they have been done.
But Christianity isn't for those who have never done anything wrong in their past and then can live completely and utterly blameless lives. Yet Christianity is for those who have done wrong things in their past, are doing wrong things today, and have understood that we need a Savior.

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And the wonderful promise of the gospel is that even though many of us maybe have very, very bad pasts, and maybe our lives have been characterized by great brokenness and great woundedness, the wonder of the gospel is that Jesus comes to us to be our Savior.
And that the things in our past which are wrong, and even the things in our present that are wrong, are not going to be the final word about us. That the final word about George will not be failure in this area, failure in this area, failure in this area, and failure in this area.
[5:36] But the wonderful thing about the gospel is that when we come to Christ, acknowledging who we are and our true needs, and acknowledging that Jesus is the one that can meet our needs, then the final word about my life, and that means everything about my past as well, the final word about my life will be a word of welcome into the kingdom of God.

So that when I die, and I wake on the other side of death, by having put my trust in Christ, by having come to him, my heavenly Father and your heavenly Father, he will smile at me, and he will say, George, I am so glad that you have come to be with me.
So as we're looking at some things about how the married are to live with each other, it's just really important for us to understand this fundamental teaching of Christianity.
So now, and that's why Paul says, all things work together for them that love God. Even those of us who've maybe had spectacularly sinful pasts, even those like that, we can have a new life and a new destiny and a new final word about our lives in the person of Jesus Christ. And the Christian community is a community of those who gather around Jesus, acknowledging their need and his power to save. So let's look now at this text called Principles for Marriage on page 991. And I'm going to be, we're going to be looking at 1 Corinthians 7 verses 1 to 16. I'm going to be reading from the Bible, which I use as my personal devotions.
And you folks can follow along in the Pew Bibles or your personal Bibles if you've brought them along. I'm going to read the first seven verses. And actually, as I read these first seven verses, there's a couple of things we have to sort of understand about this as I read these first seven verses. The first thing is, remember I'm saying that Paul here is giving us an outline of sanity.
[7:54] And some of his vice goes against the grain of the world. But he's giving us an outline of sanity. And Paul is, the church in Corinth is filled with problems. And it was probably, given that a lot of us would rather ride a bucking bronco than flog a dead horse. This first church in Corinth was a bucking bronco. It had the most spectacular charismatic gifts and spectacular evangelism and spectacular sin and spectacular problem. And they didn't have to deal with problems of no enthusiasm. They had to deal with spectacular, a porcupine type of enthusiasm that was shooting out in all sorts of different directions. And what's bringing about the writing of 1 Corinthians is that the different people have written to Paul. And some of them have been writing in sort of a grumpy fashion. And Paul is now responding. And Paul is going to respond to one of the slogans of a group within Corinth. And the slogan comes from what I would call the super spiritual. You know, maybe it's not a common

Anglican problem right now in Canada. But there can be problems of what you'd call super spirituality. And that is, you get so caught up in what it means to be a Christian and so caught up with the fact that you've received the Holy Spirit, that you start to talk and almost believe that you're an angel and you don't have a body. You start to talk and try to urge everybody to act as if we're angels and we don't have bodies, that we're not fallen, embodied creatures who are in need of grace. And so there is a group of people within Corinth who are super, super, super spiritual and are giving advice to the congregation and some people are falling into it. The advice is to almost live as if they are angels. But here's the flip side of it.
And this entire letter, both in the Greek and even more so in the English, Paul uses sideways language to talk about things. It's discreet language to talk about things. The super spiritual are saying, if you're really, really super spiritual, it doesn't matter whether you're married or not, you shouldn't sexually know another person. Just period. So if Louise and I had come into that church, they would tell us, it doesn't matter that you've been married for almost 25 years. There should be no sexual knowing in your marriage. Real, true, spiritual people know that. Real, true, spiritual people are only in love with Jesus, are completely and utterly caught up with that and are filled with spiritual ecstasies, and they need nothing else. And they've been very, very convincing. But here's the other side about this text, and this is something that Paul knows. That they're talking all this super spiritual talk, but the reality is that they talk super spiritual, talk super spiritual, talk super spiritual, and then things get out of control in their own lives, and they're visiting prostitutes.

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That's what's going on. So super spiritual talk, and maybe even for a while they sort of try to live it, but they're human beings, and what ends up happening is that some of them, some of the, that would have to be primarily men if it was in Corinth, they are going to visit some of the temple prostitutes. And that's what's at work here in this particular text. And so it begins with him quoting a letter.
Now concerning the matters that which you wrote about, it is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman. But because of this temptation to sexual immoralities, each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband. And the word have here is an active word, and it's a sideways way of referring to this active sexual knowing and receiving of the other person.
[12:24] 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 except 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 control.
This is a concession, not a command. 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. And we'll just pause. Here we see that Paul is saying that marriage, there are in a sense two particular gifts which Paul is talking about here. There'll be other gifts that he'll talk about later, but in this particular case there are two types of gifts.
One is the gift of marriage and the other is the gift of celibacy. One is the gift of marriage and the other is the gift of celibacy. And Paul is here specifically denying that the gift of celibacy is somehow or another greater than the gift of marriage. For most people the gift that they will be granted is the gift of marriage, at least for part of the time of their life. Very few people will be granted the gift of lifelong celibacy. And so Paul is first of all here not, he's completely and utterly denying that if you are super, super spiritual, then whether or not you are married or anything, the highest state of affairs is to have this gift of celibacy is normal. And the marriage bed is important in marriage. The marriage bed creates unity between the couple and it is a daily reminder of the affirmation that they belong to each other.
The marriage bed is important in marriage. It is a source of unity within the marriage or is to be a source of unity within the marriage. And it is to be a daily affirmation and reminder that the man belongs to the woman and the woman belongs to the man.
[14:54] In fact, this text is actually quite astounding in terms of its culture because you would have expected that Paul would have said something that put the man definitely higher than the woman. But Paul is very, very, you know, he's saying to me, he says, George, you belong to Louise. George, your body belongs to Louise. Everything about you, George, belongs to Louise.

And he says to my wife the exact same thing, that she belongs to me. Her body belongs to me. And it, you know, if it had just been said to the man and not the woman, it would be a great tyranny and a great totalitarianism and a great evil. And if it was just said to the woman and not the man, it would be the exact same type of thing. And in complete and utter defiance of his culture, Paul points and calls to them understanding this complete and utter ownership of one to the other.
And then Paul says something. He tries to teach them a value which is also very, very countercultural. You see, the easy thing would be for me to be able to say to my wife, you know, you owe me this, you owe me this, you owe me this. And my wife could say to me, you owe me this, you owe me this, you owe me this. And Paul tries to teach a different lesson. He said, he says to me, he says, George, you have to try to learn that the phrase that should go through your head, not all the time is, you owe me, you owe me, you owe me. But the phrase that should be going through your head, Sinclair, is, I owe you. I owe you. I owe you. In other words, rather than me looking at my wife and thinking what she owes me, the scripture text is calling me to say to myself, I owe my wife. I owe my wife. I owe my wife. You see, it's a complete and utter inversion of our natural habits. It's a complete and utter inversion of our natural tendencies. It's that the scripture is trying to teach the husband to go around with the attitude of debt that he owes his wife and all of the appropriate attitudes and behaviors and aspects of character. And the same text is calling the wife to have that attitude towards her husband. As I said, this text, which at first looks so hard, is actually the outline of sanity. It is the outline of what would lead to a happy marriage.
Now, the next group of verses, Paul is trying to take this basic teaching and apply it to those in the context of people who are trying to dissolve marriage, either by encouraging an angelic belief that your angels or by, in a contradictory way, those who are trying to encourage divorce.

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And so in the face of people who are trying to weaken marriage and dissolve marriage, either from the point of view of an angelic super spirituality or just from those who just say, you know, divorce is just a natural thing and just go with the flow and move on to the next thing. In the face of an attempt to dissolve marriage, Paul applies what he's just said to three different situations. To those who are widowed in verses 8 and 9, to those who are Christians who are married in verses 10 and 11, and in verses 12 to 16, he deals with the situation of a couple who are pagans and one of them becomes a Christian.
[18:59] And so let's listen to some of Paul's advice first to widows and widowers. Now, there's a bit of a technical argument as to why unmarried could also be translated as widowers.

To the widowers 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 be aflame with passion.
Actually, the original Greek says it is better to marry than to burn. And passion is sort of added there and makes it look as if somehow or another Paul is concerned with just the mere fact that there's passion. He's really saying to those who, and Paul himself was probably a widower.
We know that by the time that he was writing this letter, he's unmarried. In fact, throughout most of his apostleship, he was unmarried. But if, in fact, he was a rabbi before he became a Christian, he was probably married and he must have become widowed at some point in time. But Paul is silent about that part of his life from before. And so Paul is just saying, listen, for those of you who have been married and you are now bereft of your spouse through death, his advice is that we should consider being single, that we should consider that that would be the state of affairs that we might want to remain in for the rest of our lives. He doesn't go into it, but he just considers it. Rather than automatically thinking that marriage is the very next step, you should consider whether it's appropriate for you to continue on in singleness. And then in his next part here, he's not just referring to the fact that they don't appear to lack self-control. He's referring once again to the fact that what's happening is that, in probably the case of men, is the men are going to temple prostitutes. And he's saying, okay, listen, listen, dude.
He's just being really blunt with them. He said, you know, if you've lost your wife, going to temple prostitutes isn't the way to go. Okay? If you can't be living a single life in some type of celibacy, you should really be pursuing marriage. He's not at all, he's not excusing or giving any type of permission for this type of sexual outlet. He's saying, I understand that you have sexual needs. I understand that you have things that you can't control. And listen, the way that you should be orienting your life is considering remarrying, not in pursuing this other type of path. Then in verses 10 and 11, to the married I give this charge, not I, but the Lord.
[22:07] Now, I just want to pause here before I read the next thing. This is a really interesting little thing. Sometimes Christians have wondered, does it mean that the next part isn't scripture? You know, that Paul is sort of just saying, you know, this is just my personal opinion. It's not like that at all. It actually sort of opens the door for a moment as to how the early Christians thought.

And the early Christians, it appears from this text, wanted to keep the sharpest division between the remembered words of Jesus and their own words, and the remembered words of Jesus as being vastly precious and unchanging. And so Paul isn't saying here that the other things that he's going to say, I mean, he wouldn't have known at the time that would eventually become scripture. He wouldn't have known that. But he wants to make it very clear that, you know, some things he says are clear that he's heard the words of Jesus as told to him, maybe by the other apostles, the other witnesses of Jesus, maybe even some of the early written documents. I know the words of Jesus, and this thing which I'm about to say can go right back to something which Jesus himself has said. And let's listen to verses 10 and 11. To the married I give this charge, not I but the Lord, that 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. This text is saying that as the basic general principle, Christians shouldn't seek divorce, this is a very hard teaching today, but Christians shouldn't seek divorce, if at all possible. Paul here isn't dealing with all of the different things.
He's not as, in fact, in an odd way, you're going to see that in a moment he's going to say that if in the case of a pagan husband, let's say, and a Christian wife, and if the pagan husband divorces his wife, he's going to, in effect, give the wife permission to remarry. And we know from the Gospels and from the Old Testament law that there's different conditions that allow people as a concession

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after the tragedy of divorce to remarry. Paul isn't giving a complete teaching here in just one verse about this, but he's sitting down a fundamental principle is that he's saying, George, when you marry Louise, what you are saying is that you will never be with another woman, and that is good. And when Louise married me, God, in a sense, the scriptures are saying, Louise, you will never be with another man other than George, and this is good. Work on it. This is the fundamental desire of my heart. Verses 12 to 16. To the rest I say, I, not the Lord. That's what I was referring to earlier, this little sort of a window into how precious the early Christians understood the words of the Lord. And the others here now are people who have been maybe both pagans.
They would have been, in Corinth, they would have been both pagans, and one of the two of them have become Christians, but they're married. That if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. If a woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband.
[25:52] Otherwise, your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases, the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace.

Wife, how do you know whether you will save your husband? Husband, how do you know whether you will save your wife? Now, the thing that is so wonderful about this text is that the text is saying, God claims your family. God claims your family. If I had become a Christian before my wife, and if we were to have children, the saying here is, God desires the wife and all of the children to be his. God has a claim, a passion, an interest in that entire family. And we also see here that the benefits for any one of us coming to know Jesus is not just some private little autonomous individualistic benefit that just flows to me in my private spirituality, but that to come to the living God through the person of Jesus Christ and to be filled with the Holy Spirit, to be drawn close to Christ, is to lead to benefits and to lead to changes that extend beyond the limits of my body and the limits of my mind. That in a sense, the Holy Spirit is to flow through me and to flow into my wife and into my children and into my neighbors, and it goes beyond that. You can just see the basic principle. But this very specific text is saying, you know, praise God that you have been granted a pagan husband, and you have wonderful children, and you have come to saving faith in Jesus Christ.
And Christ now desires and claims your entire family, your children and your husband. And this is an invitation not to consider how you can now leave, either to become super spiritual like those angel spiritual types, or even just to try to imagine that you can somehow create some far better thing by being married to another person, maybe by being married to a believing husband. The text is saying, pray for your husband and pray for your children. Do all in your power to pray and to pray and to pray, and to surrender your life to Christ and surrender your life to his word and to be open to the Holy Spirit in such a way that your life will have a godly influence on your children and on your husband or on your wife, as the case might be. That you can grow and flourish where you are. That is the wonderful message of this passage of Scripture. I began by saying that Christianity is not for the sinless, but for sinners. It is not for those who have never done anything wrong in their lives, but for those of us who know that we have done many things wrong in our lives. But Jesus has come to save us.
If there has been any type of touching of our conscience today as a result of this text, that is a good thing, not a bad thing. Because to touch our conscience is the touch of Jesus upon our souls, upon our bodies, our minds, and our hearts. And it's a touch not to push us away, but it's a touch that beckons us to come to him that we might know forgiveness and the new life which he is full of. Shall we bow our heads in prayer?
Father, we give you thanks and praise that you do not weigh our merits, but pardon our offenses. We give you thanks and praise that your Son Jesus came to give us new life, new birth, a new hope, a new destiny, a new final word. We ask, Father, that your Holy Spirit would move and work in our lives to bring us to Jesus and through Jesus to yourself, that we might hear through Jesus that final and welcoming word that comes from you. And Father, for those of us who have been called to that state, holy estate of matrimony, we ask that your Holy Spirit would fall upon us and fall upon our marriage and fall upon our children, that our marriages might be characterized by the teaching of your word, that we might learn to love our spouse in a godly and full manner, and that we might learn to love our children in a godly and full manner. This we ask in the name of Jesus,

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your Son and our Savior. Amen.

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