

Guarding marriage

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[0 : 00] All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be enslaved by anything.

Food is meant for the stomach, and the stomach for food, and God will destroy both one and the other. The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body.

And God raised the Lord, and will also raise us up by his power. Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ?

Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never. Or do you not know that he who is joined to a prostitute becomes one body with her?

For as it is written, the two will become one flesh. But he who is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. Flee from sexual immorality.

[1 : 08] Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God?

You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body. Now, concerning the matters about which you wrote, It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.

But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife, and 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, 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.

[2 : 32] 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.

Now, I want to begin this morning by asking how you got dressed to come to church today, not in the great pyjama debate whether or not you attempted to put pyjamas on, not the clothes you're wearing, but dressed in the sense of how did you come to church intending to present yourself to other people.

Some of us, I guess, will have come dressed as if we're going to a job interview where we try to look competent and sorted, where weaknesses are suppressed and put to one side and hidden.

Others will have come to church dressed as if we're going for a doctor's appointment. As you sit in a doctor's waiting room, you're only too conscious that there's something wrong with you and something wrong in all likelihood with everyone else as well.

Now, I say that because we're looking at 1 Corinthians 7 as we continue this series in 1 Corinthians. We're looking at 1 Corinthians 7. We're going to be in this chapter over the next three weeks.

[3 : 52] And I suspect that for many of us, it is going to be an emotionally raw chapter. And one of the best ways we can prepare to study this chapter over the next three Sundays is if we come dressed not for the job interview, my life is sorted, but rather if we come dressed for the doctor's appointment, my life is a mess.

I'm a sinner, and I know you are as well. I think that will stop us deceiving ourselves. My life is fine. And it stops us being deceived by others.

You all look so perfect. Surely I'm the only one whose life is not perfect. And that will then, of course, mean that all of us will be in the position not only to take God's word to heart ourselves, but also to apply God's word to one another.

Perhaps those who are unmarried here this morning, we may have heard that reading from 1 Corinthians 7 and perhaps even wondered why we bothered to come to church at all. But, of course, whenever we hear the Bible, we don't just do so with a view to applying God's word to ourselves in our own situation.

It may be that one day you'll be considering marriage, so this may be of relevance in the future. But, of course, even today, it's relevant, isn't it? Because we all need to be pastoring one another.

[5 : 18] We all need to be teaching one another, encouraging one another, helping us to put God's word into practice. In other words, I never listen to a sermon, I should never listen to a sermon simply with a view for what I can get out of it for myself in the situation I face at the moment.

No, I do that. But I'm also always listening to a sermon with a view to how is God's word going to enable me and help me to encourage and pastor others, those in JAM, those in my growth group, those perhaps we talk to over coffee after the Sunday service in conversation.

Now, in a sense, chapter 7 marks the start of a new section of this letter where Paul begins to answer some of the Corinthians' own questions. It seems they have written to him, asking him various questions.

We get that sense, I think, in verse 1, now concerning the matters about which you wrote. Nonetheless, there's a very clear link with what we saw last week.

You'll remember those who were here last week, chapter 6, verse 20. The chapter finishes with the words, you are not your own, for you are bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.

[6 : 34] And here in chapter 7, which we're looking at this morning, we see what that looks like, glorifying God in our bodies for those who are married. And I've put three headings there on the outline on the back of the service sheet.

First of all, sex within marriage is good. Secondly, sex within marriage is selfless. Thirdly, sex within marriage is necessary. First of all, sex within marriage is good, verses 1 and 2.

Now concerning the matters about which you wrote, it is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman. But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband.

Now one of the key principles for understanding any passage in the Bible is that we need to understand why it was written in the first place. In other words, we need to go back to Corinth, so to speak, and think, well, what was going on in Corinth such that Paul had to write this?

And once we've understood what was going on back in Corinth and what God said to them then in their situation, then we can understand what he is saying to us today in our situation.

[7 : 45] And there are clearly some, if you look again at verses 1 and 2, there are clearly some in Corinth who are saying, it is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman. It's why that is in inverted commas.

It's a quote. Now those who have read this in the New International NIV version, confusingly, the NIV says, it's good for a man not to marry, which gives the impression here that Paul is anti-marriage.

But the original literally reads, it's good for a man not to touch a woman, where the word to touch is a euphemism for to have sex with, hence the translation that we have here in the ESV.

So it seems that some Christians in Corinth are saying, it's good for a married person not to have sex with their husband or with their wife. There's a suggestion in verse 5 that perhaps they think that it's more spiritual to go and pray instead.

Perhaps given what we saw last week in chapter 6, the fact that some were going to temple prostitutes, perhaps others have taken on board what Paul says back in chapter 6, verse 15, when he says, do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ?

[9 : 00] And chapter 6, verse 20, so glorify God in your body. And they've decided that sex perhaps is rather dirty and should best be avoided. Throughout church history, there have been Christians who have frowned on sex and regarded it as somehow unspiritual.

For example, Eva Chartre, who was a monk in the Middle Ages, said that a spiritual person should abstain from sex on Thursdays in remembrance of Christ's rapture, on Fridays to remember his crucifixion, on Saturdays in honor of the Virgin Mary, on Sundays for Christ's resurrection, and on Mondays out of respect for the dead.

Well, you say, at least there might be something to look forward to midweek. But you see, someone can sort Ken out afterwards.

But Paul completely rejects, you see, that kind of super spirituality. Sex within marriage is good. Verse 2, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband.

That word, to have, is present, ongoing. So it is good for a husband or wife to keep on having sex with their spouse.

[10 : 17] The reason, verse 2, because of the temptation to sexual immorality, which we'll consider in our third point. It seems they've lost sight, you see, of what we saw last week.

That sex is designed by God to unite two people and to do so at the very deepest possible level. Physically, emotionally, psychologically.

Which means that sex within marriage is good. It's very refreshing, isn't it? You see, there's nothing in the Bible's teaching that's begrudging about sex.

God does not say to married couples, have sex if you must, but only to have babies and try not to enjoy it too much. Indeed, the Bible gives an entire book, the Song of Songs, to the joy of sexual love.

Yes, sex can be frustrating, can be disappointing, but it is nonetheless real and it is good. Now, it hardly needs saying, I think, but Hollywood, of course, gets this completely the wrong way around.

[11 : 28] So, in so many films and TV programs, it is those who are not married who end up in bed with each other all the time.

But let me ask, when was the last time you saw a film or TV program when a married couple had sex? I'm not, of course, asking whether you watch 18 rated films, even a PG can make it quite clear what's happened between the cuddle the night before and breakfast the next morning.

I couldn't think of anything. I mean, the closest, I mean, it may just be that I live a very sheltered life, but actually, the closest I could get to was Downton Abbey where Lord and Lady Grantham wear more clothes in bed than most of us do when we're up during the day.

There's a sort of quick peck on the cheeks to say goodnight in a bed which is so enormous, it's clearly designed that they stay as far as possible. Now, it may surprise us, I guess, that the Apostle Paul is so positive about sex within marriage, in which case, do listen to last week's talk if you missed it.

Paul neither preaches or steers Victorian values, nor does he treat sex like a disposable paper cup which, once used, is then thrown away.

[12 : 44] sex within marriage is good. Secondly, sex within marriage is selfless, verses 3 and 4.

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. In verse 3, Paul says, not just that sex is good, but if we are married, it is a right.

It is an obligation. An obligation both for husband and wife. An obligation not to demand sex and to demand my rights, because that would be unloving, but to give the other their rights.

I notice here that each partner, both husband and wife, owe each other the right of sexual delight, which cuts completely across, doesn't it, the often unspoken assumption, perhaps, that sex is the privilege of the husband and the duty of the wife.

[14 : 03] No, it is just as much his duty and her privilege because your body is not your own once you are married. Contrary, you see, to what is sometimes implied, those who grew up in the 1960s and 1970s were not the first generation to recognize that women have sexual rights and longings.

The Apostle Paul got there first in the first century. For Paul, you see, to write this in the first century actually was completely extraordinary.

He lived in a male dominated society. Wives had few, if any, rights whatsoever. Paul addresses equally the needs of men and women, husbands and wives.

Yes, in chapter 11, he will say the husband is the head of the wife, the head of the household, but she is in no way a second-class citizen within the marriage.

husbands and wives have different roles, but they are equal and with equal sexual rights over each other's bodies. The next time you see someone tells you that the Apostle Paul was a misogynist and simply the product of his culture, then bring them to 1 Corinthians chapter 7.

[15 : 24] Paul is not afraid to be different from his culture. He is not afraid to be distinctively Christian and nor should we be either, nor should we be afraid to be distinctively Christian and different from our culture in terms of sex and relationships and marriage.

Sex within marriage is selfless. Both husbands and wives are to regard their bodies as belonging to the other and to do all they can to satisfy their spouse sexually.

That's a very long way, isn't it, from the way which our culture thinks about sex. Our culture thinks about sex in terms of what I can get out of it, my satisfaction, my fulfillment, it's all about me maximizing my pleasure.

It's one of the promises of the marriage service. With my body I honor you, all that I am I give to you. I take it there will be times where that will be a delight on both sides, but there will also be times where that will be more costly to one spouse than it will be to the other, where one perhaps has less or little desire for sex for whatever reason.

But the point is that each is responsible for the sexual fulfillment of the other, an other person centered view of sex, not what I can get out of it, but how I can best please and satisfy the other person.

[17 : 02] If you're thinking that marriage might one day be for you, then this is the part of the commitment that you'll be making. It's part of the commitment that Andy and Alice made to each other yesterday.

Again, it's where Hollywood gets it so wrong, isn't it? James Bond, you see, knows nothing about sex whatsoever. He uses women, he abuses women, he leaves behind him a trail of devastation.

It is simply about his own sexual gratification. Notice by implication how this highlights what is wrong with masturbation.

I can't take this, I don't think, to a particular verse in the Bible that says it's wrong in itself, but by its very nature it is egocentric and self-gratifying.

At best, it is training ourselves to think of sex as something that is purely about me and my pleasure. At worst, it is adulterous.

[18 : 05] Likewise, pornography, all about me and what I can get out of it for myself. At worst, adulterous. sex is selfless.

Well, you say, what might that mean practically? Well, I guess men in particular, we need to recognize that we are different from our wives. For a man, sex is often a relief from the daily routine of life, whereas for the wife, it grows or fails to grow out of the daily routine of life.

men can often treat sex as another timetabled event at the end of the day. So they come home, arriving home perhaps from work, having a quick meal, checking emails, and then expecting the action to start without further ado.

Wives need time, care, and affirmation, and tenderness. Sex is selfless. Thirdly, sex within marriage is necessary.

Verses 5 and 6. 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.

[19 : 28] Now, as a concession, not a command, I say this. Ruth rightly read this earlier to make the point that verse 6 should really go with verse 5 rather than verse 7.

A few years ago, the Wellcome Trust did a survey in which they discovered that married couples were seven times less likely to have an affair if they were regularly having sex. Isn't that interesting?

Seven times less likely to have an affair if they were regularly having sex. Married couples. It reflects, you see, what God is saying here in this chapter, an active sex life within marriage is key to guarding against sexual immorality.

If you read the Valentine's Day edition of the Times last weekend, they came to very similar conclusions. Now, this is not the only thing God has to say about marriage within the Bible, as if the only reason for marriage is to guard against sexual temptation.

But nonetheless, it is a very significant reason to get married. Why? Because, verse five, the devil is active in this area.

[20 : 42] He will do all he can to tempt us sexually. Because he knows that that will not only rot up our marriages, but it may also rot up our Christian life as well and cause us to turn away from the Lord Jesus.

The stereotype, of course, is that he wants sex and she doesn't. But the statistics suggest it can just as much be the other way around.

So, do you want to help your husband or your wife to flee sexual temptation? Perhaps at work or online or on business trips?

Don't deprive each other, says Paul. In other words, we need to remember not only that God forbids sex outside heterosexual marriage, but he commands sex within heterosexual marriage.

It's very important, that, isn't it? You see, Paul knows all too well how easy it is for sex to simply go by the wayside within marriage when we're single or newly married.

[21 : 58] I think this can be almost impossible to understand. But Christopher Ash, in his excellent book, Marriage for God, he uses the illustration of a sports car. And he says that many of us, before we get married, see ourselves rather like a high performance sports car sitting at a red traffic light with a tank full of petrol raring to go.

waiting for the moment when the light goes green and you can race off into the distance with a roaring libido that's going to last forever. But the fact is, of course, that many who have been married for about a couple of years or who face the daily exhaustion of work or children will know exactly the temptation that Paul is talking about here in these verses.

Michelle Wiener Davis, not a Christian, but in her book, she says the sex-starved marriage is an issue for those in their 20s and 30s just as much as it is for those in their 40s and 50s.

And an issue, of course, far more for those who live in London. She adds that the sexless marriage or marriage where sex is not valued is a high-risk strategy.

The other person often ends up finding what they need elsewhere. Now, Paul doesn't say how often husbands and wives should have sex.

[23 : 21] In the first century, one non-Christian writer said it depended on one's employment. So men of independent means every day, workmen twice a week, donkey drivers once a week, camel drivers once a month.

Perhaps some might want to change employment. I don't know after hearing that. I'm not quite sure which category most of us would come into. Now, there's none of that here, is there? Paul is not prescriptive like that.

I take it as an area of freedom, but nonetheless it is to be discussed. It's to be discussed and to be worked out, but the principle is clear. Don't leave the door ajar for Satan.

Just as last week, one of the main applications last week was to flee sexual immorality. So, one of the ways we do that within marriage is by not denying, depriving one another.

Yes, there'll be times when we'll be less sexually active than at other times, perhaps during illness or if a new baby arrives or something like that. But notice Paul says, verse 5, that even then we should at least be talking about it.

[24 : 35] It needs to be by mutual agreement for a good reason and for a limited time. In other words, those of us who are married, we need to be talking about our sex lives as well as having sex.

Now, last time I preached on this passage, the first person I spoke to afterwards, who is not in this room, said this was completely unrealistic and that he hadn't had sex with his wife for weeks. Well, what does God say to that?

I think God is saying to us this morning in 1 Corinthians 7, don't make excuses. make it happen. Discuss it, make it happen, guard your marriage.

Don't deprive one another. There are only so many times when a headache or tiredness should be allowed to get in the way. Men in particular, we need to be careful, I think, don't we, that we are not so busy at work that we don't deprive our wives, that we're at home too late and we're not able to give her the time and tenderness that she needs.

Whereas I guess the danger for wives with children, perhaps, is that she'll focus all her energies and attention on the children at the expense of her husband.

[25 : 59] That all her emotional energies, so to speak, will be used up on the children and she'll have nothing left at the end of the day for her husband. For others, there'll be unaddressed hurts, tensions that need to be discussed.

For some, there may be physical difficulties, in which case, go and see your GP. The point is this, isn't it? It's that the rhythms and patterns that we have in our lives will either cause sexual delight to flourish in marriage or to fade in marriage.

For what's wonderfully very realistic, we need to make sure it is flourishing. So here's a very practical suggestion for those who are struggling.

Why not keep one evening a week free? Get it in the diary. I don't think there's anything unspiritual about diarising these things. Make sure the children, if you have children, are in bed on time.

Make sure they have plenty of exercise so they get to sleep. sit down, have a meal together, make sure you talk over the meal, put the thermostat up in the bedroom, and go to bed early before you're too tired for anything else.

[27 : 17] Sex within marriage is good. It is selfless. It is necessary. Now, later on in 1 Corinthians 7, Paul will say singleness is good as well.

We begin to get there in verse 7. I'm going to leave verse 7 for today because the second half of the chapter has much more on it. But Paul's teaching on marriage, you see, also reflects the fact that each one of us is affected by sin, that we are all sinful, that actually each part of our lives is affected by sin as well.

Marriage can be hard. Let's not shy away from that. Let's make sure we have Christian friends who will encourage us, who will ask us the questions that need to be asked.

For all of us, are we fleeing sexual immorality? And for those who are married, how are our sex lives going?