

'Sex, Marriage & What Matters More'

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[0:00] Well, some children were asked about how you decide who to marry in life. And Kristen, age 10, said, No one really decides before they grow up who they're going to marry.

God decides it all way before and you find out later who you get stuck with. When asked what makes their parents' marriage work, Brad, age 10, said, They both agree they don't want any more children.

I can relate to that. And when asked about love and marriage, Kenny, age 7, said, Oh, it gives me a headache to think all about that. I'm just a kid. I don't need that kind of trouble.

Well, as we come to today's chapter, it speaks about marriage along with sex, singleness and divorce. Aren't I glad I came back from St John's today?

But I am aware more seriously that these can be sensitive topics for some. But the good news of Jesus reminds us that God is for us.

[1:07] He loves us and wants what's good for us and is always ready to forgive us and help us. We also need to remember that this chapter is not all the Bible has to say on these topics.

And so if you want to find out more, I'm always happy to speak with you. For still others, you may feel like today's chapter is not relevant at all. But it's still worth knowing what the Bible says about these topics so that we can talk rightly about them with friends or if the opportunity arises with kids and grandkids or nieces and nephews and the like.

Because these days, their only education on these topics are coming from movies and the internet. And we all know what a mixed bag the internet is. But let me begin by saying that the background today is that Corinth is, well, the church at Corinth is a rather messed up church.

Hopefully you would have realized that by now after looking at the previous chapters. And they also wrote to Paul asking about some specific topics. And we get that from verse 1 where he says, Now for the matters you wrote about.

And then he quotes them. You see, it seems that they asked him various questions or to give them advice about various issues.

[2:30] And you can kind of imagine that different groups in the church saying, Hey, ask him about food sacrifice to idols, which is chapters 8 to 10. Or ask him about spiritual gifts, which is chapters 12 to 14.

For just as we saw in the earlier chapters, they were debating over which leader to follow. It's easy to imagine they would debate about how to be spiritual, how to be holy. Indeed, as we'll see today, some thought to be holy meant they had to divorce their non-Christian spouse now that they had become a Christian.

While others thought to be spiritual meant you could do whatever you wanted with your body, as we saw last week. While still others thought it meant not using your body for sex at all, which is what they say this week in verse 1.

And so Paul begins by saying, actually, sex in marriage is good. Point one. Now for the matters that you wrote about, it is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.

But since sexual immorality is occurring, each man should have sexual relations with his own wife and each woman with her own husband. Now notice Paul, he doesn't completely disagree with them.

[3:38] He doesn't say, no, you're completely wrong. After all, outside of marriage, it is actually good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman, which is sexual immorality.

Someone from the earlier service said, that's impossible. Everyone does it these days. And that's what I'm thinking. Yes, but it doesn't mean it's good for us either. I mean, I still remember when I was in year 12.

One of the girls, this is studying for the VCE, right? But the girls, every class, she kept running out in tears. And that's because she was sleeping with her boyfriend and they'd just broken up and it was causing all sorts of havoc.

But this sexual immorality is what some of them have been engaged in. Inside marriage, though, sex is good. It is a good gift from God to enjoy. In fact, verse 2 suggests that it's one solution to sexual immorality.

It's like Paul says, well, you can't control yourselves anyway, like you saw last week. And so you actually should have sex, but just inside your marriage with your own spouse. Verse 2, your own husband, your own wife, not someone who isn't.

[4 : 50] As we heard in our first reading, it says to drink water from your own cistern, running water from your own well. That's not really talking about water, right?

And this helps avoid sexual immorality. After all, if a spouse is neglected, then they might be more tempted to look for sex elsewhere. Not that they should, of course. Instead, they should talk to their spouse.

But the point is, marriage is a good gift. Sorry, sex in marriage is a good gift from God. It's meant to be like the superglue that helps hold couples together till death do us part.

What's more, marriage helps the couple enjoy sex even more because it's a very intimate act, isn't it? Where you're often naked and vulnerable. And if both parties, though, have legally pledged themselves to each other in marriage, it brings more safety and security for that nakedness and vulnerability.

And so rather than covering up and feeling shame about your body, you have the safety to enjoy each other's bodies. God's way is actually good for us. But again, the point is sex in marriage is good.

[5 : 58] And so Paul effectively says a couple, married couples should go for it. Verse 3, Here Paul encourages sex for married couples.

In fact, in verse 5, he says, The only good reason for a husband and wife to stop is to pray. And only that for a while, so they can come back together. In fact, in verse 6, he says, Abstaining from sex for prayer is only a concession, not actually a command.

In other words, he really encourages this for married couples. Now, before one spouse writes down these verses to remind the other spouse of later, I'll notice a couple of things.

First, this is in the context of sexual immorality amongst them. And so Paul is not addressing every situation. There might be all sorts of reasons that a married couple cannot have sex, whether because of age or stage of life, or because of sickness or their physical circumstances.

And so we need to be aware of that. And second, whatever the situation of the couple, sex is still about doing what's good for the other person by mutual consent.

[7 : 39] We see this idea of mutual consent, not just in verse 5, where the words come up when it has to do with abstaining to pray, but we also see it by the reciprocal language that Paul uses.

It's always very even. Own wife, own husband. Or verse 3, the husband. Likewise, the wife. Verse 4, the wife. This time, then the same way, the husband. You see, it's all very mutual, all very even. And so for married couples, we're to talk about it. It's about mutual consent. It's also about being other person-centered, that is serving the other person. And we see this idea in verse 4, where each spouse's body belongs to the other, and they yield it to the other.

It's other person-centered. And so this may mean having sex even if one spouse doesn't feel like it, or on the flip side, refraining from sex because the other spouse isn't really up to it.

The point is sex in marriage is good and encouraged for married couples as much as they can, says Paul, but by mutual consent and being other person-centered, depending on their circumstances.

[8 : 52] For it is God's gift to help married couples. Though Paul knows this may not be applicable for everyone, unlike those who are single. In fact, he says in verse 7, Paul says he wishes everyone was single as he is.

And he says this is a gift, just as marriage is a gift. Probably not in the sense of being gifted with some super ability to be single, any more than being gifted with some super ability to be married. I know single people can struggle being single and married people can struggle being married, right? Rather, it's talking about their situation as a gift from God, which brings certain opportunities to be used for God.

Either way, both are gifts. And while Paul will come back to singleness next week, he now focuses on marriage this week. Point to verse 8.

Here again, we see how Paul promotes singleness as a good option, but so is marriage, especially if the couple cannot control themselves.

[10:15] For marriage is the safe place for sex, you see. Of course, these days, people put off marriage for all sorts of reasons. And I get it in terms of the cost of living, especially with rental prices.

But it seems young people think you have to have the job, the car, the house, savings for a massive wedding, and the list goes on before they get married.

But the reality is, you don't have to have all that, do you? Before you get married. And actually, what happens is, they realise they could always do with more, and so they keep putting off marriage, which is actually not good for them, because it doesn't provide that stable and legal security and safe environment for them.

But for the Christian couple especially, it's far more important to be godly than to have all that stuff. And so far better to get married on a budget than to burn with passion and commit sexual immorality.

For marriage is a good gift that helps couples be godly. And because it's good, then married couples are not meant to divorce. Verse 10 and 11, To the married I give this command, not I, but the Lord Jesus, a wife must not separate from her husband.

[11:31] But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife. In Paul's day, the words separate and divorce mean the same thing.

And Paul appeals here in verse 10 to a command that the Lord Jesus gave, which is back in the Gospels, where he talks about marriage, where for this reason, a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife and the two will become one flesh.

And then in the yellow, therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate. Divorce. In other words, don't divorce.

And so in verse 10 of our passage, a wife must not separate from a husband, nor verse 11, a husband from his wife. And this again is for our good, because divorce is painful, isn't it?

Lots of people at our church have been impacted by a divorce, one way or another, whether they have been divorced themselves, or their parents or children have been divorced, or whether they've lost friends because of divorce.

[12:38] Divorce is painful and expensive, by the way. And so not divorcing is for our good. Though sadly, as we'll see, sometimes it's the only option left.

But verse 11 seems to suggest that divorce, if it does take place, then the person must remain single, never to marry again. And yet, this cannot be the case for every divorce, because Jesus gives an exception to this, and Paul will go on to give another one in our passage.

Rather, Paul seems to be addressing the same issue that Jesus was, where people would simply divorce because they wanted to marry another person. You know, as they say, trade in their husband or wife for a younger model, or however the saying goes.

That seems to be part of the Pharisees' desire when they tested Jesus in that Matthew 19 passage. Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?

You know, I've found someone who's better looking than my husband or wife, so I'll just divorce my current one. Or my wife doesn't cook the meals that I like, so I'll divorce her. Or my husband still doesn't put the toilet seat down, so I'm going to divorce him.

[13:54] That kind of any reason. Well, Jesus says, if that's still, if that's the case, then that's still adultery. Even if you've legalized it by giving them a certificate of divorce, simply so you can marry another.

He goes on to say, Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard, but it was not that way from the beginning. Not God's plan or intention. And then he says, I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, and here's an exception, except for sexual immorality, having an affair with another person, and marries another woman, commits adultery, he says.

Yes, there may be permitted reasons for divorce, like one spouse who engages in an affair, but to simply divorce so that you can marry another person is still adultery, even if you've given them the certificate.

And this was even more common in Corinth than it is here in Melbourne. We have ancient records of women having eight husbands in five years, poor women, and marriages were never expected to end in death.

We have an inscription, actually, of one marriage that lasted 41 years, and it says, uncommon is the marriage that lasted this long that ended in death and not divorce.

[15 : 14] So divorce was very common back then, and that's what Jesus is arguing against, and it seems this is the issue that Paul is addressing in verse 10 and 11, since he has in mind the Lord's command from Matthew 19.

And so if you divorce in order to marry another, then, verse 11, the person is to remain single and not marry that other, so you don't commit adultery or be reconciled.

In fact, the order in verse 11 implies that you're to remain single in order to seek reconciliation. But sadly, there may be other reasons when that is not possible, and divorce and remarriage might happen.

And Paul goes on to give us one when he talks about having one non-Christian spouse. Verse 12. To the rest I say, I, not the Lord, if any brother has a wife who is not a Christian or a believer and she's willing to live with him, he must not divorce her.

And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer, and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband.

[16 : 29] Otherwise, your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. But if the unbeliever leaves, let it be so. The brother or sister is not bound in such circumstances.

God has called us to live in peace. But how do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife? Here, back in verse 12, the issue that Paul is addressing are married couples in Corinth where only one spouse has become a Christian.

And that one spouse is worried that their non-Christian partner or husband or wife will make them and their children unholy or unsanctified.

The words holy and sanctified both mean set apart as different. You know, we're to be set apart for God with different morals in our world, aren't we?

But here, Paul says, the non-Christian spouse is actually sanctified by the Christian one and made the children holy. That is, the Christian spouse has set apart the non-Christian spouse and children to be in a special situation to hear about Jesus, which is different to most of the other families in the world who have no Christian in their family to tell them about Jesus.

[17 : 49] And so instead of the non-Christian spouse making the Christian one unholy, it's the other way around. The Christian makes the non-Christian holy, sets them apart with an opportunity to hear about Jesus.

And in verse 16, perhaps even be used by God to save them. Here's another reason to stay married. Not just because marriage is a good gift from God, but because God might use you to save them.

But notice verse 15. Here's the example of divorce and remarriage that is permitted. If a non-Christian or unbelieving spouse leaves, then the Christian is not bound.

In other words, they are free to divorce and remarry. For it says, we are called to live in peace with each other. Now I need to say, there may be other reasons why divorce and remarriage are permitted and even necessary.

Like the one that Jesus mentioned about one partner having an affair. Or it could be even one person who claims to be a Christian yet refuses to be reconciled despite further attempts to reconcile that is just met with hostility rather than peace.

[19 : 04] It's just that the situation Paul is addressing here is one where only one spouse has become a Christian. But the point is marriage is a good gift from God and even a mixed faith marriage.

And so if an unbelieving spouse is willing to stay, then stay married and don't divorce. or as Paul puts it, remain in your situation as a Christian. At point 3, verse 17.

Nevertheless, each person should live as a believer in whatever situation the Lord has assigned to them just as God has called them. This is the rule that I lay down in all the churches. God has called us to faith in Jesus at different times and stages in life.

At different life situations whether, you know, single or married for example. And since some Corinthians thought they should change those situations, you know, get divorced, divorce the non-Christian so you can be holy or whatever.

Paul says, no, actually, remain where you are. For not only did God assign those situations to us as a gift, just like singleness and marriage are both gifts, what matters more than our marital status is being a Christian whatever the circumstance.

[20 : 15] This principle of remaining is repeated three times in this little paragraph, the beginning, the middle and the end. And so the general principle is remain in your situation as a Christian.

Both in terms of a Christian who keeps God's commands and a Christian who finds their worth in Christ. And to illustrate this Paul gives us two examples that the Corinthians were not debating about.

The first is circumcision which is usually a mark between, of a Jew and so it's really a ethnic status thing whether you're a Jew or a Gentile. To which we could add Australian, Chinese, Indian, Sri Lankan, African, Iranian, Malaysian, Greek.

I think I'm missing some. Either way our ethnic status doesn't matter. What matters more is being a Christian. Verse 18. Was a man already circumcised when he was called to faith?

He should not become uncircumcised which is impossible anyway. Was a man uncircumcised when he was called? He should not be circumcised. Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing.

[21 : 21] Keeping God's commands is what counts. Each person should remain in the situation they were in when God called them. You see he's saying your situation is not what's important and so you can remain in it.

Rather what is more important, what matters more is being a Christian here in terms of keeping God's commands as interpreted by Jesus and the New Testament. Like honouring God with our bodies as we saw last week or getting married rather than engaging immorality this week.

But does that mean then that those who are single have to remain single? Well no, the principle is general. There are exceptions to it which is what Paul now shows with his second illustration about slavery.

Slavery was very common in Paul's day but slaves had a very low social status whereas those who were freed had a high social status. For us it's kind of like being a medical professor versus a church minister.

I'll let you decide which one has the low status. But again, what matters more is that our social status is being a Christian and this time not just in terms of keeping God's commands but also finding our worth in Christ.

[22 : 40] Verse 21. Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you. Although if you can gain your freedom, do so. For the one who was a slave when called to faith in the Lord Jesus is the Lord's freed person.

Similarly, the one who was free when God called to Christ is Christ's slave. You were bought at a price. Do not become slaves of human beings. Brothers and sisters, each person as responsible or with God should remain in the situation they were in when God called them.

Paul says, if you became a Christian when you were a slave, don't worry about being a slave because in the end your worth is found in Christ not your social status.

In fact, every Christian is a freed person. Because Christ has freed us from slavery to sin and judgment for life eternal with him. On the other hand, those who are free people should not let their high social status go to their head because every Christian is also a slave, Christ's slave.

For we are to serve Jesus who died for us. And so our social situation is not what matters. Rather, what matters more is being a Christian. This time in terms of finding our worth in Christ.

[24 : 00] And this means we can remain in whatever social situation we're in when we became Christians. The only thing we're not to remain in is sin. But notice with this second illustration there is an exception.

He says in verse 21, if you can gain your freedom, do so. And verse 23, do not become slaves to other people because God has bought us at the high price of Christ's blood just as we saw last week.

And so that means those who are single don't have to remain single. They can marry as we'll see next week. And even some who are divorced can remarry as we saw this week.

But again, what matters more than our ethnic status or our social status or even our marital status is being a Christian in whatever situation we're in by keeping God's commands and finding our worth in Christ alone.

And we can do that with God's help. And so let's pray for it now. Let's pray. Father, we thank you even for this long and difficult chapter for it reminds us of your good purposes for us.

[25 : 18] And we pray that you would help us to live as Christians in whatever situation you have placed us by keeping your commands and finding our worth in Christ.

We ask it in his name. Amen.