

Sex, Marriage and Singleness in God's Church

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[0 : 00] Let's pray. Father God, we pray today that you'd help us to understand this part of your word, that we might live rightly before you, and we might rightly depend upon the Lord Jesus Christ, and rightly give our lives to service of him.

We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, relationships, they are something else, aren't they? God is a triune God. He's Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

He's relational in his very being, and he's made us relational beings as well. Being in relationships is therefore the very core of life, and the one particular relationship above all others that captivates us is the relationship between a man and a woman.

And that relationship consumes many of our waking hours, and it bursts into our dream world with astounding regularity. It governs our decisions. It guides our attitudes to many things, and at times it even determines our faith.

That relationship's an amazing relationship. Every woman, every man, every nation, and every age in history has been captivated by it. Countless songs have been written.

[1 : 14] Poems have been recited. Suicides have been enacted. Wars have been fought. Lives have been determined. It is a powerful, wonderful, captivating thing, this particular relationship.

And one Bible writer expresses his wonder for it in the book of Proverbs, chapter 30, this way. Three things are too wonderful for me. Four, I do not understand.

In other words, there's three that are really something, and the fourth is over the top, as it were. Right? So, the way of an eagle in the sky, the way of a snake on the rock, the way of a ship on the high seas, and the fourth, the way of a man with a woman.

Friends, that relationship, that relationship between a man and a woman, is there on the very first page of the Bible. It's a large part of the second and third and fourth pages, and whole Psalms have been written about it, and even a whole book is devoted to it, almost bang, smack in the middle of the Bible.

And God uses it as a mechanism to talk about his relationship between Christ and the church. So, today we have got 40 whole verses of one chapter of 1 Corinthians to look at, which largely is on this issue.

[2 : 26] Before I start, I need to warn you, this is a long chapter. In fact, I've worked out I will probably, you know, jump out of it before I get to the end, because we're not going to have enough time.

And Andrew Price, when he preached on it at four o'clock, did exactly the same thing. I found out at exactly the same spot that I'm thinking I'm going to have to bail out. Not because it's the difficult part.

I think, actually, the part beforehand is the difficult, but I'm not going to get through the whole lot. So, I need to warn you, this is a long chapter. There are multiple issues, and there is no way, really, I am going to be able to address the details of it.

So, I'm going to try and give you a big picture of it. This is what I intend doing. I want to give you some background information that you'll need to really understand what's going on here. Then I'm going to go through the major sections, well, many of the major sections, and summarise some of the main points.

At various points, I'm going to stop, and I'm going to summarise some of those main things, and I'm going to draw out some main points, some points of application that we might take on board for ourselves today in the context in which we live.

[3 : 29] Now, let me tell you now, there is a little here today for everybody. So, no matter what age you are from, there's a little bit here for you. And that's because these questions that these early

Christians had for their apostles, their apostle, are questions that really we have as well.

We might couch them in slightly different ways. They may be slightly different questions for us, but the general topic is one that we have questions about as well. Now, the second thing to know, before we actually get into the chapter, is that these chapters do not constitute a manual for marriage.

I need to say that up front. It was never designed to be that. Have a look at verse 1, and you'll see this. So, verse 1 of 1 Corinthians 7. Paul says, Now, concerning the things about which you wrote. So, friends, you need to understand that this chapter is an answer to some questions that were asked by the Corinthians. It arises from those questions.

It's therefore a specific response to specific questions. And those specific questions come from a particular context, which is somewhat different from ours.

[4 : 44] You see, our context is different from first century Greek and Roman world. And our questions may very well be different from the questions they wanted to ask in their little letter that they wrote to Paul.

And Paul may very well, should he be here now, want to say different things to us because our questions from our context are different. However, God has caused Paul to write in response to these specific questions.

And as he answers them, he does answer some of our questions as well. And he gives us some teaching that will help us answer our questions. And it is the word of God.

And so it will always be helpful for us. It will always help us grow in godliness. It will always teach us and instruct us and change our attitudes if we will listen and obey.

But remember what I said, it is not a manual about marriage. You will need to go to the rest of the Bible to get a full picture of God's intention for marriage. Finally, before I get started, I need to warn you.

[5 : 47] Parts of this chapter can look a little like anti-marriage, if not also anti-sex. They are not, let me tell you before we start. It's just that there are specific things going on behind the scenes that shape both the situation and the questions being asked and the answers being given and the way Paul goes about answering them.

As we go through the chapter, I want to remind you that the Bible as a whole is pro-marriage and believe it or not, the Bible as a whole is pro-sex as long as sex is kept within its God-ordained context.

So that in mind, let's take a flying run through this chapter. And I want to look at verses 1 to 7.

Actually, I need to go back just a little bit because I did miss a bit.

Could you go back and just, I want to have a look at marriage in the first century. No, I don't think we've got time. We'll keep going. Okay, let's look at verses 1 to 7.

I want to show you that Paul starts off by citing a statement made by the Corinthians. The statement is there in verse 1. Can you see it? It goes like this. It is well for a man not to touch a woman.

[7 : 04] Actually, some have argued that the sense of it is like this. It is good for a man not to use a woman for his sexual gratification. Or perhaps even you might not translate it, but give the sense of it this way.

It is good for a man not to have sex with a woman for the sake of pleasure. Or you might put it even more colloquially like this. It is good for a man not to bed a woman simply for the sake of it.

Okay, I think that's the sense of what is going on here. And that I think is what Paul is responding to in verses 2 to 7. Now let me see if I can summarize his response. He goes something like this.

We live in a world of sexual immorality and licentiousness. That's the context in which we live and move. In such a world, we Christians don't buy into sex outside of marriage.

So we Christians restrict sex to marriage. That is to a man and his wife, a woman and her husband. And such a marriage should be full of sexual intimacy and mutuality.

[8 : 08] Both of these things are somewhat revolutionary in the first century world. But mutuality in marriage is absolutely revolutionary in the first century world where, well, patriarchy was the norm.

And that is where men ruled the roost. There were some exceptions within society, but largely that was it. Friends, I want you to listen very carefully to two things about these verses that have particular relevance for us Christians today.

First, there is no hint here in these verses that men like sex and women don't. Okay, no hint within these verses.

And there is no hint, I think, elsewhere in Scripture that men like sex while women just put up with it. No, God made both men and women to enjoy sex and to like sex in its proper context.

Don't let the modern preachers fool you who with their language of men wanting sex all the time and women not wanting it, really emphasize it.

[9:13] No, you see, it is not in the Bible. It is not a biblical perspective. Second, I want you to listen to the note of mutuality in these verses. Look at the couple making a decision together. They make it together.

Can you see that? They're deciding whether they're going to abstain from sex or not in these first five verses. It is not that the woman lets the man make the decision for her. They make the decision together.

And, you know, I think this is the only place I can think of in the New Testament where a married couple make a decision together that is open for us to have a look at. And they do it mutually.

And if they can't agree, they stay with the status quo. Friends, if you're going to shape your marriage by the Bible, then make sure that you shape it by the Bible, not by the books that say they're based on the Bible, but are actually more shaped by Christian culture than the Bible itself. By the way, before we move on, look at verse 7. Verse 7 says, Do you notice the language of gift there?

[10:26] Paul uses that language. And we need to ask, what gift is he talking about? Now, it could be the gift of singleness or celibacy versus the gift of marriage.

However, I suspect that's not what it is. I suspect it's the gift of contentment. It is the gift of contentment in serving Christ in a dedicated and highly devoted way.

Commitment to serving Christ, not distracted by sex. Contentment with not being distracted by the other relational commitments that go with marriage.

And you're going to see Paul develop this later on within 1 Corinthians 7. It's a sort of contentment that he talks about in verses 25 to 38, which we are not going to spend time on, but you can read yourself.

Okay, let's move on. Verses 2 to 7, Paul addressed the married ones within the church at Corinth. And his advice to them was, maintain good sexual relations within the context of mutual relationships.

[11:27] And then he turns to a second group, that is the unmarried and the widows. Look at verses 8 and 9. Paul says, To the unmarried and the widows, I say that it is well for them to remain unmarried as I am.

But if they are not practicing self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion. The term used here for unmarried is a word that applies to any person not presently married.

Okay, so just think about it for a moment. Who could that be? What sort of people might be included? Well, those who have never been married at all. They would be the unmarried. Those who are separated.

Those who are divorced. Those who are widowed. They are the unmarried. And Paul's advice to these people and to those who are widows is clear. They should remain unmarried if it is at all possible for them.

And that's the advice he says. He says, that's what I've done myself. So follow me. However, at the same time, Paul makes it clear that it's not wrong to marry.

[12:37] In fact, if there's a choice between marriage and being overcome with passion, Paul considers that marriage is the answer.

You see, if you must express yourself sexually, if you have drives that drive you to sex, then enter that state which God ordained for sex.

That is marriage. Friends, please note what's going on here. Paul is saying that the answer to a powerful sexual desire is not, how could I put it, suppression or repression.

It's not abstaining. The answer to powerful sexual desire is what? Get married and have sex. That's really what he's saying.

And I want you to notice that marriage is not just here for procreation. It is a place. It's not just a place where you have children. For Paul and the rest of the Bible, marriage is, yes, for that.

[13:40] But it is also a place for sex. Sex is not bad in the Bible, you see. Sex is good as long as it's expressed in the right way with the right person.

And I say both of those things very clearly. As long as it's expressed in the right way with the right person. So this is Paul's first bit of advice about to the unmarried.

He says, and by the way, that bit of advice raised some very significant issues. Have you thought about it? Remember who the unmarried are. For example, what happens if the Christian person being talked about here is an unmarried person who's unmarried because they're currently divorced?

And what happens if that divorced, unmarried person has a strong sexual desire? How do they sort out these verses and those other verses in the New Testament which seem to outlaw remarriage? Well, I don't have the ultimate answer to this question, but I do have some ideas on it if you want to talk to me about it later. But I encourage you to explore this verse here with other verses in the Bible that set out to explore that particular issue.

[14:53] Oh, and there's another way, there's another by the way that I want to say about these verses, which is this. You see, we have a massive problem, I think, in the contemporary world. With increasing health, we see the age of puberty increasingly decreasing.

With the increasing education we have and pressure to achieve, we see the age of marriage increasing. With technology, we see an enormous exposure to sexual temptation.

So what can we give advice to those people who are caught between those great pressures? And they are those, everyone between about 14, 15, through to marriage, when people are getting married these days, that is 30.

That's a large, that's 15 years of their life that we are saying, don't marry, but you're actually able to have sex. What do we say to such people? What advice can we give to people caught between these various great pressures?

Well, when I was in student work, it was very clear to me. If people said, I'm caught between these great pressures, I would say to them what Paul says to them here. Get married then.

[16:08] Get married. Don't say, I've got to achieve this, I've got to get into this particular job, I've got to have this particular professional standard, and so on.

No, I'd say, if you're feeling this tension, get married. You see, if sexual desire is a problem, then the answer is marriage and sex within marriage. That is the word of God, and it can be trusted as much in this century as it could in the first century.

So now let's turn to verses 10 and 11. These are addressed to married Christians again, and Paul says this. I want you to notice something here.

Paul is uncompromising and direct, isn't he? He uses the word command. He draws in the authority of Jesus. He's saying this is an order from God's apostle.

It actually is from the Lord himself, and I think that means that it comes from places like Mark chapter 10 and so on. That is, the Lord Jesus is said to say similar things. It is an order from God himself, a wife must not separate, and a husband must not divorce.

[17:35] And my guess is that in the end, both the word for separate and the word for divorce means exactly the same thing. It means breaking the bond of marriage in some way. You see, it appears that in the first century, most marriages, it's very interesting if you look at marriages in the first century, most marriages were expected to end in divorce.

Rather than death. So we think we've, you know, got something on the first century that, you know, we expect marriage to end in divorce. No, in the first century, you went into marriage expecting it would end in divorce.

And that very few people, relatively few people died married to the same person, as it were. So, Paul says no. He actually advocates something very counter-cultural in the first century.

He said Christians are not to break the bonds of marriage. And here Paul stands in a great tradition. For the book of Malachi tells us that God hates divorce because it is a breach of faith.

But let's look at the bit in between. The bit in between the command to wives and to husbands seems to address the question I raised in the last section. Paul says to the woman, But if she does separate, let her remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband.

[18:52] This seems to follow the advice of Jesus in Mark chapter 10 verses 9 through to 11. The commitment to marriage by a man and a woman is lifelong.

It is underwritten by God. It's designed to reflect God's character of faithfulness. It is not to be loosened or destroyed by human beings. And what Jesus says in Mark 10 verse 9 stands, What God has joined together, let no human tear apart.

Let no one tear apart. Marriage is designed for permanency. That's how God designed it. It is designed for faithfulness to another person and for no breaches in faithfulness.

So let's move now to verses 12 to 16. And the focus falls on other sorts of marriages. And the ones here, he says, he labels them as the rest.

Now, the first line appears to indicate that unlike the previous verses here, he doesn't have a word from Jesus. However, he does have instruction. I think he's addressing those people who are not Christians in marriage.

[20 : 00] And he's got some instruction, even though he's got no direct word from the Lord. And his instruction is that Christians should remain married to their pagan husbands or wife if that husband or wife is content to continue to live with them.

Okay, imagine the situation. Imagine Heather was not Christian. And I was married to her. And she said, well, I'm content to live with you. And then what this text passage is saying is then I should continue to live with her.

I ought never to be the person that pulls out of this relationship. If anyone does, it's the non-Christian. But not me. You see, and his instruction is remain married until your pagan husband or wife no longer wants to be married.

In fact, notice what's happening here. Instead of, we tend to think that if you're married to a non-Christian, however that got to be the case, that the Christian will be tainted by the unbeliever. Rather, you see, what I think these verses say is that the unbeliever is, through the Christian, brought into contact with God. They're brought into contact with someone who is Christian, someone who is holy, that is, someone who's in contact with the living God.

[21 : 25] And that has some impact on the unbeliever. It's hard to work out exactly what Paul means when he says that the unbeliever is made holy through the believer. However, it doesn't mean, I think, that they're to be saved, because later on there's a prayer that they might be saved.

However, it does mean that they are in a different position from those who had no spouse who is saved. And that might result in the salvation of the spouse even. You can see that in verse 16. Moreover, Paul also makes clear that the children are in a different position from those who have no Christian parents. And when you think about that, all of that should work together, shouldn't it, for the Christian staying committed to the relationship.

The Christian should honour God's hatred of divorce and not seek to break a marriage. However, look at verse 15. If an unbeliever then chooses to separate, then the Christian is not bound. See, God is a God of faithfulness and restored relationships, and Christians are to reflect their God. And that means they should be constantly working out avoiding breaches of marriage.

[22 : 33] If they are Christians, they are under the command of Jesus himself. If they are married to a non-Christian, they also have the command of God through his apostle. They ought to work at staying in the relationship and not get out of it.

Friends, we could spend so long on this stuff, so I've got to press on. Let's quickly look at verses 17 to 24. The basic thrust of these verses is that Christians should bear fruit where they are.

One writer has said it this way. Christians are to bloom where they are planted. Okay, in the sense that if God has planted you in a particular situation, a particular context, bloom there, have fruit there, grow there.

No matter what your circumstance or situation is, it comes from God. It is a calling from God. You are to live as Christians there.

Whether you are married or not, circumcised or not, free or not, free or a slave, the Christian is not to focus on shifting their location or their circumstance, but they are to focus on walking by faith where they are.

[23 : 47] He or she is to lead the life that God has assigned to them, the life which God called them to. Friends, we live in a world where betterment is a lifelong dream.

We are told from the beginning of life that we shape our circumstances and our situations. And so, we contemporary Christians spend our lives craving something better.

What could it be? A better job? A better car? A better house? Better parents? Better children? Better spouse? Better prospects for our children?

Better children? And our lives become, before long, totally determined by these things. But what God wants, more than anything else, is that we be servants of the Lord Jesus where we are.

That is to be our focus. We are to be God's person, bought with the price of the blood of His Son, and focusing on living as God's person in the situation that God has placed us in.

[24 : 53] Now let's now turn to verses 25 to 38. Paul turns our attention to those who are not yet married. And his advice to them is clear. He thinks that those who are not yet married should remain unmarried.

And his reasons are very pragmatic or practical. First, he talks about something. Can you see it there in verse 26? He talks about the impending crisis.

Now no one, I've read the commentators, no one really knows what that means. What is the impending crisis? I think we should read it in the light of verse 29, which talks about the time being short.

And I think we should read it in the light of verse 31, where Paul talks about the world in its present form, passing away. And perhaps what's going on is there are some localised events that are occurring round about Corinth that are portents of the sort of end of the world, the things that will mark the end of time.

And such events, such things that are really stressful times, where things are going wrong, are not the time to consider marrying. Moreover, the opportunity that singleness gives to serve the Lord devotedly is a great asset, and it should be taken on if it can be.

[26 : 05] However, Paul doesn't want to live, doesn't want people to be overly burdened, so he assures them, it's not a sin to marry. But perhaps, given the current situation, it is best not to marry.

So friends, in the remaining time, I just want to see if we can tie these things together a bit. And here I want you to move to a theme that runs through all of these passages. Follow with me. Look at your Bibles. Look at verse 2.

Paul says, because of cases of sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband. I want you to look at what he's saying.

He's saying each person, husband or wife, should stick with their own spouse. Okay, now look at verse 8. Paul focuses in on a particular group, those not presently married, and he says, to the unmarried and the widows, I say that it's well for them to remain unmarried as I am.

In other words, if it's at all possible, stay where you are. Look at verse 11. Paul speaks about the possibility of separation from a non-Christian, and he says, or divorce, and he says, but if she does separate, let her remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband, and the husband should not divorce his wife.

[27 : 22] I wonder if you can hear this again. Paul tells these women, don't seek to change your current situation. Now look at verses 12 to 16.

They say exactly the same thing. Stay in the relationship and the situations that you are in. Do not seek to change it. Now look at verse 26.

Paul says, I think that in view of the impending crisis, it is well for you to remain as you are. Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife?

Do not seek a wife. Stay where you are. If you are married, stay married. If you are unmarried, don't seek to change. Now look at verse 37.

This is a different group of people, but the advice is similar. Paul says, If someone stands firm in his resolve, being under no necessity of having his own desire under control, and has determined in his own mind to keep his fiancée, he will do well.

[28 : 21] There it is again. Can you see what he is saying? He is saying, if it is at all possible, stay in the present relational situation. And serve God there. Don't seek to change.

Finally, look at verse 40. Paul's speaking now to widows, and he says, But in my judgment, she is more blessed if she remains as she is. And I think I too have the spirit of God.

I wonder if you can hear the common thrust of all of these verses when you put them together, and we just go through the whole chapter like that. It is this. Remain as you are.

Actually, I think we could rephrase it a little bit. It is this. Remain as you are, if it is at all possible for you to do so. Paul acknowledges that sometimes there are exceptions to remaining as you are, and they're okay.

But I wonder what, can you see what Paul might say? He says, why he might say this. He says it because his focus is on undivided attention and devotion to God.

[29 : 23] And in most cases, relational change is not necessary in order to have an undivided focus upon God.

Now, it may be that in view of some present crisis or some other situation in life, there may be a need for change. But Paul's advice still remains the same. Changing situations is not generally the key to a successful Christian life. Changing situations is not generally a key to successful Christian living.

No, Christian living is worked out in the context that you are in. the relationships you are in, the situations that you are in.

And if your focus is on godliness, then you should be focusing on how to be godly in the current context, not of getting out of that context and hoping that doing that will sort everything out for you. [30 : 22] So in other words, if I'm struggling in my relationship with Heather, the answer is not to get out of it, but to be godly in it. Does that make sense? And that's what it means to be Christian, not to get out of it, but to be godly in it.

Christian living is worked out in the context you're in, the relationships you're in, the situations you are in. And if your focus is on godliness, then focus on how to be godly in this context.

Friends, what is your priority? Because every one of you here, my guess is, or most of us here, will want to be in a different situation. For one reason or another, not necessarily relational, but maybe situational or whatever.

What is your priority in life? Is it godliness? Is it serving God? Well, God has called you to be godly in your current situation.

Godliness will not largely be served by changing your situation. Godliness is worked out in your current situation.

[31 : 32] Friends, I wonder if I could really press this home. You see, if you're not yet married, don't spend your time thinking that life and service of God will be best served in being married.

No, you can be godly and serve God well in your current situation. And if you're currently married, don't think that life and service of God will be best served by your changing marriage partners.

No, you can be godly and serve God well in your current situation. If it's the issue of sex in your marriage relationship, then work it out together following biblical guidelines.

If it's the issue of sex outside of marriage, then perhaps consider marriage where sex properly belongs. Can you hear what Paul's advice is?

Don't spend your time being unhappy with your context. Spend your time working out how you can be godly in that context. Work it out in your current context.

[32 : 57] Don't seek to be changed. Seek to be godly. Seek to serve the Lord. Seek to prioritize Him and your service of Him.

You see, after all, it is your relationship with Him that is of most importance, not your relationship with the opposite sex. So, concentrate on God and your relationship with Him.

And do that in the situation you're in, unless that situation is threatening your godliness. And there are very few cases where it does do this.

Be godly where you are. And in the marriage, in the area of marriage and sexual ethics, there are two fundamental absolutes. Okay, so here they are.

Two things that can be said strongly and powerfully from scripture. One, avoid sexual immorality. No matter what your marriage context is, avoid sexual immorality.

[34 : 00] Second, be obedient to God and serve Him in the context you are in. If you can do those two things in your current situation, then just get on with it. Don't lust after change, but lust after godliness.

And practice it in the situation into which God has placed you. I wonder if we could just for a moment go back to where we started. Do you remember how I spoke about the wonder of relationships? Do you remember how I said that God affirmed that wonder?

And God said, that He had a great place for relationships, and that's particularly the relationship between a woman and a man. A man and a woman. I want to close by saying that as wonderful and God-given as that relationship of a man and woman in marriage is, it is not the key relationship that you are in.

It is not the key relationship that you are in. The key relationship that God wants you to focus on is your relationship with Him. And if you read Paul carefully in this chapter, you'll find him focusing exactly on that.

Your relationship with your spouse will have its day, but your relationship with God will determine your eternity. So focus on that relationship.

[35 : 22] It is the most important one. It is the relationship which will give you the most satisfaction and will have eternal consequences. Give your life to that relationship.

Give your life to service of God and to devotion of Him and let Him shape every other relationship that you have. Let Him be the center of your existence.

If you read between the lines in Paul, that is exactly what he's saying. And if you read in 1 Corinthians up to this point, that is exactly what he's been saying.

The Corinthians were going astray on all sorts of things and he wanted to call them back to God and their relationship with God and its importance. And they were tempted to go elsewhere.

And that's what he's saying here in this area, in the area of marriage, sex, relationships. Focus on God and relationship with Him. That is the most fundamental thing.

[36 : 20] Let Him be the center of your existence and be content in that. Let's pray. Father, we thank You for relationship with You.

We thank You that it is through the blood of Your Son that You have brought us into relationship with You. We thank You also, Father, for the many relationships in life that You have placed us in. Father, we pray that in those relationships, our primary intention might be to love You and then to love others as we have been loved by You.

Please help us to be godly and to focus on our service of You, which may involve our service of the one that You've placed us in relationship with. And please, Father, help us to do this well and to get our priorities right in these areas, we pray.

In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.