

with faithful contentment

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[0 : 00] We're at 1 Corinthians chapter 7 and to put it bluntly it's about sex and the right use of sex where it fits in terms of God's purposes and in relationships.

And the passage tonight talks about it in a much more positive way than where we were last week when we were talking about pornea or immorality in 1 Corinthians chapter 6. So the tone is entirely different.

I figure when you're talking about sex you don't really need an opening illustration. You can just start. But I did, I opened up the paper the other day or read online. I think it was News Limited, that fantastic source of news.

And there was a story about some bloke who's been living in Bali for the last three months and to put it really crudely he's managed to sleep his way through 100 different women and his goal is to achieve three women in the one night.

And in terms of an example of pornea or immorality, it's a fantastic example of pure selfishness.

[1 : 07] And I think what I want to say tonight is that the journey from pornea, immorality, to right relationship before the Lord Jesus Christ and the beauty of what he calls us to is a journey from selfishness, utter selfishness, to selflessness.

And in the end it is rooted in the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ. So right through this series Steve's picked up the idea that the way of the cross transforms our world view and that's exactly what we're going to see tonight when we talk about sex.

We're talking about the cross of the cross of the cross of the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ transforming the way that we do relationships. And it's a movement from selfishness to selflessness.

Steve said some things last week in his message which I thought were just pure inspirational. He spoke about marriage with a very high view in terms of one flesh relationship and what it stands for and what it means.

And I think I'm quoting him. I took notes while he was saying this but it might sound a mouthful but listen carefully. It's a one flesh. Marriage is a one flesh relationship. A one flesh relationship is embodied in personhood, in people.

[2 : 29] And it's a place where personal transformation is going on. People are changed. And the bar is raised very high for a sexual relationship in marriage.

It deeply involves the full person. There is a self-giving and a self-disclosure. It's not driven by self-gratification. And he said that sex is a radical self-donation.

It means being vulnerable with your entire life to the other person and not independent of them. And so they become, you grow into this life of oneness, deep personal relationship and sharing.

You don't lose yourself. You are radically supplemented by the other person and changed and transformed as you seek to serve Christ together. And my words, I want to say that there is deep safety and security in a relationship like that.

It is deeply fulfilling. It's entirely consistent with other scriptures. So when you go to Ephesians 5 where a husband and wife submit to one another out of reverence for Christ, they take up different roles within a marriage relationship, wives to husbands as to the Lord, husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the church.

[3 : 44] You get a picture of the same selfless giving going on and submission to Christ even as we submit to one another. And so there's its extraordinarily beautiful picture where marriage is driven by the sacrificial love of Christ for us all.

Now I want you to notice the sheet. You should have noticed already. You've been given that sheet tonight. On one side is the text of the scripture. On the other side is notes. And I'm doing this in

three bits sort of. The first bit I'm just talking for a bit.

The second bit I'm going to take us into the notes and scan across the whole chapter. And the third bit I'm going to stop and we're going to have questions. Because I think by you being able to ask questions tonight, it's a way of applying what we're talking about here in the scripture and maybe raising issues that are particular issues that you see for yourselves or in people around about you. The Corinthian church started four years before this letter when Paul came preaching to them. There wasn't a church there before he came along and started preaching.

And as he preached the cross of Christ, it began to transform a body of people who had heard the gospel for the very first time. It's an immature church.

[5 : 06] Last week Steve said he, Paul rebuked them really severely for not being as mature as they ought to have been, even at four years old.

And he's angry with them. He was angry with them because they were putting up with the type of immorality that anybody outside the church could look in. Anybody who's not even a Christian and say, you're kidding, they do those sorts of things?

So their problem was not so much the immorality, but the lack of church discipline. They weren't able to say to one another, this should not be. And then in chapter 6, these are people who have been converted out of a very licentious culture.

You know, anything goes. Lots of sexual options and lots of permissiveness. Young men would have been encouraged to pursue sexual gratification from adolescence when their bodies start to work sexually from puberty until their mid to late 20s, so maybe nearly 15 years before they actually get married.

And homosexual induction by older men with younger men was common in the Roman Empire. Temple prostitutes were the norm. You could go to the temple and you could have sex and you could call it worship.

[6 : 31] I grew up in an extended family culture which said it was okay for men to sow their wild oats, you know, have sex wherever they like. And then we also had this double standard that sex and bodies were dirty and somehow you ought to stay pure.

Very confusing. And in chapter 6, Paul effectively says, we don't have to keep apologising for the life that we have been brought from because of the work of Christ in transforming us.

We don't have to continue to bear shame because of who we were and what we did. He tells us that we have been made clean by the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ.

So in verse 11, chapter 6, we were like that, but we have been washed. It says you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of God.

Corinth's a place which is shaped by Greek culture. Steve talked about that last week, hedonistic culture where anything and everything goes. Their slogan was, everything's permissible for me.

[7 : 49] Cross of the Lord Jesus Christ, I'm set free. And Paul's response, but not everything is beneficial. And as with any culture, new believers carried the culture that they were in, into the church where the gospel would now do its ongoing work of change and transformation.

In other words, when you come to Christ, you're not necessarily transformed out of everything that was the former life. And there's a journey which goes on as you wrestle with what it means to have come to Christ and the change that he now brings about in your life.

And so it's not unreasonable to think that Corinth was a church with people in all sorts of relationships. Maybe widows who hadn't married again but were sleeping with widowers or people who'd taken a fancy to them.

Or unmarried people. So when it says virgins here, we're not necessarily talking people who haven't had sex. We're talking about unmarried people. And perhaps unmarried people.

Virgins sleeping with boyfriends, girlfriends. Or married people engaging in sexual relationships outside of marriage. That's the way the world of Corinth was before the gospel came.

[9 : 12] And it's not that different from our world. The guys were liberated back then. The girls weren't. In our culture, the girls have been set free in some measure. It's not real freedom, but the age of contraception and having control over your own bodies and stuff like that means that young women are able to behave almost like young men.

The world calls it freedom. The Bible portrays it as a slavery. And he said last week that sex matters.

It's much more than just another bodily function. It's not just food in and food out. In the end, in 1 Corinthians 6, he makes it very clear that he says, Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body?

For it is said the two will become one flesh. But he who unites himself with the Lord is one with him in spirit. Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body.

But he who sins sexually sins against his own body. Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you whom you have received from God?

[10:32] You are not your own. You were bought at a price. Therefore, honour God with your body. He says sex matters and wrong use of it causes great harm.

If sex was just another bodily function, then why not relieve that need by going down for a night of worship at one of the local Corinthian temples with the prostitutes, your wife's got a headache and she will be glad not to be put under pressure.

But he says here to sin sexually is to sin against your own person, to damage your sense of self.

Plenty of that in the media this week and every other week for the last yonks.

one tragic story after another of teenagers being violated by media personalities or trusted religious figures. The children didn't sin.

They didn't ask for it. And there is one story after another about the impact on their person by these crimes. Alcoholism, eating disorders, fear, blame, promiscuity, many young people have been greatly harmed and they have carried that harm into older life and relationships.

[11:56] And one headiness defender sits there in court the other day and says it takes two to tango and after all I only thought I gave them a good time and they are enjoying what we are participating in.

terrible, terrible distortion of something which is a very, very good gift of God when used according to the maker's instructions.

The cross of Christ radically transforms our relationships. I joked this morning I said I went to King's Cross on Friday to do some research for this sermon and I did.

I did. I went to visit my friend Ed Vaughan who's the minister at St John's Darlinghurst which is right there at the cross and I had heard a story through the week of a marriage, a wedding that he took last Saturday and I heard it from a very dear friend from a long way back and I know Ed really well and I went to him to say look I was told what a fantastic service you took but it's an amazing story of the grace of God the couple that were married last Saturday the woman was in the Bible study I went to 25, 30 years ago I don't even remember and she went to Bible college and at Bible college went to SMBC and studied there for a while Sydney Missionary Bible College was in a relationship with someone I don't mean an inappropriate relationship but in a relationship with someone that looked like they might marry and then something happened the wheel fell off and it just didn't go anywhere and almost on the rebound she took up with another fellow that everybody who knew her just thought this is a disaster and she was married and within two years she was divorced 20, 25 years has gone by she's working in Christian ministry in the eastern suburbs and she is diagnosed with terminal cancer that has come quite rapidly upon her now what's actually happened in the couple of months or period of time just before this is she's somehow been back in communication with the man that she might have married 25 years before who's gone to the other side of Australia and in the course of communication she then communicates with him and says

I'm dying and this is what's happened and his immediate response was to leave his work and to say to her I've always loved you I still loved you and I am coming back to care for you until you die and they were married in front of 200 people last Saturday who were just joyous and tearful at the same time and I don't know about you but the story for me just engaged my heart because it was pure selflessness not selfish I'm going into this for what I can get out of it but it was such an expression of the servant heart of God that we see in Christ in this man's response to this woman and it's even more beautiful than that for lots of reasons but she's obese the cancer treatment has destroyed her body and she bought a wedding dress and she grew out of the wedding dress and needed another one before the wedding so in terms of the beauty of the world she's probably nothing to look at but in terms of the inner beauty which is radiated in Christ this was something which was very very very special that happened and continues to go on so when you get to

[15:44] Corinthians move beyond immorality and you move into what do you do with sex where does it fit in terms of God's kingdom and God's plan and God's purposes and Paul brings them back to the way of the cross and as he goes into chapter 7 there's a very distinct turn that goes on here in

the text this is the first time this happens in Corinthians but he says now for the matters that you wrote about he turns his attention for what he wants to say and he's now responding to some stuff that they've asked him about and he quotes them it's not that obvious in the English but he's actually quoting them so when it says here it's good for a man not to marry he's not saying it's good for a man not to marry he's quoting them they've gone back and said to him so is it better for a man not to marry in light of the immorality that's here in this world and that's a really hard thing to understand and even when you read the commentaries on this they go different ways one of the ways that the commentators go is they say like it's an aesthetic response it's sort of like I'm going to try and live the pure holy lifestyle now rather than get my hands dirty with immorality and sex and all that sort of stuff no but you do see that

I had a friend he's not a friend really someone I knew who's very high up in the Hare Krishna movement and when he was about 25 we grew up parallel to one another knew one another at the end of high school he became a Hare Krishna and he's risen in the movement I remember he got married I think he's now on about his third marriage but he got married and he said we believe that sex is purely for procreation so we only come together and have sex and make love in our marriage when we're trying to have a child we don't do it for enjoyment Roman Catholic priests at their ordination are asked this question in the presence of God and his church are you resolved as a sign of your interior dedication to Christ to remain celibate for the sake of the kingdom and in lifelong service to God and mankind two of my friends resolved not to have sex on the night of their marriage because they wanted to spend the night in prayer to God I never really thought it was my place to ask how they got on but their desire was to lay aside their desires and give themselves to the

Lord on that night and I don't want to criticise them for doing that but I think I want to say and I think Paul says here you're not more holy by taking a disposition like that and in fact in the opening words he actually says yeah husband and wife might decide not to have sex for a little bit just so they can pray but make sure it's not too long and no I'm not prescribing it I'm not teaching it as something that you should do so that's the ascetic type response and he's not endorsing it but there is another way you can read this if you understand the immorality that they've come from and if you understand the people asking these questions have been in all sorts of messy places in terms of sex they might just be saying so we shouldn't be sleeping with girls we shouldn't be doing the barley thing and he will come in now and teach about that and now I want to turn I think to that sheet which I've called my mud map and if you need to know what a mud map is don't even bother I'll explain it later but the green line is sort of verses 1 to 40 of 1 Corinthians 7 and you're going to see this isn't going to take very long

I'm not going to take ages to go through 40 verses but above the line this whole section breaks into three the first 16 verses are addressed to people who are either married or who have formally been married so a married person is someone who's happily married somebody who's unhappily married and a formally married person is somebody who is widowed or perhaps divorced or whatever it is they're not specifically mentioned the middle sections about circumcision and slavery and that at first glance you think what's that doing in the middle of this stuff on sex and the third part really it's to some of the people at Sunday night churches to people who are not yet married haven't been married and so you've got my green fences there you've got you know people who are in a marriage relationship and sex is part of it or not part of it and then you've got people who haven't been married yet and sex is part of it or not part of it and sometimes when you're in one of those places you look over the fence and think oh it looks better over there

I'd like to be getting some of what they're getting I'd be really interested to try that out and see how that works and I don't want to I think that's a very normal type of response for all of us to be interested in these things and how it works and how it goes on so if you come back again to the first section sex and the married and the formerly married you've got four sections in there you've got he talks to married couples and then he talks to widows and then he talks to unhappily married people that's people who might be considering divorce and then he speaks to people who are married to someone who's not a Christian so somebody who's married to not a believer and he's got things to say to each of them so let me just read a little bit and that because I want to get to the end verse 2 since there is so much immorality each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband the husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife and likewise the wife to her husband the wife's body does not belong to her alone but also to her husband and in the same way the

husband's body does not belong to him alone but also to his wife don't deprive each other except by mutual consent and for a time so that you may devote yourselves to prayer and then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self control and on it goes let me tell you that most men read that passage and go wacko the wife's body belongs to me and I'm not sure it works in reverse quite the same and let me tell you that there are some evangelical

[22 : 18] Christian publications written by friends of ours who have written if you can't control yourself sexually solve the problem by getting married and let me tell you that that is a really crass and wrong understanding of what is written here because it's not just people who aren't married who haven't got a sexual relationship people can be married and in a sexual relationship and still not satisfied so what do you do go and get more sex from outside the marriage of course he's not saying that here but can you see that if you take that sort of turn if you if you grab hold of this passage and say see what the little woman should be giving me and she's not you have turned from a selfless stance to a selfish stance because the question now becomes about me and what I get out of this relationship and what is due to me selflessness to selfishness it's hard for young blokes I can speak as a man I can't speak as a woman I'm glad I can't speak as a woman but I will speak as a man and guys are initiators when it comes to sex often and there's something about how we're wired that that's how we are guys are interested in the female form guys are drawn to particular forms of pornography that women aren't necessarily drawn to in the same way but some of that stuff's changing and guys can be very big in terms of thinking about sex and as a young man not married it's really easy to think like I can I want to get married because I want to be able to enjoy that sort of stuff and I think I'm just saying if that's where we're working from in terms of mindset we're working from a selfish place where it is all about us and what we're going to get and without regard to the other person coming as the selfless man looking to serve this woman who

I'm going to take as my life partner who will say yes to me as I say yes to her to serve before the Lord Jesus from this day forward and forever more as long as God gives us breath on this planet. So sex can distort our thinking in really unhelpful ways. It becomes the goal rather than the relationship and the person and we live in that distorted environment and I have experienced some of the distortion of that environment and it ends up having to be worked out in your marriage. It's not a great thing to bring to your marriage. But I think he upholds sex as a wonderful thing given by God but he takes it out of the Corinthian world environment where you can get it anywhere and he brings it inside a marriage live before the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ and at the same time as he does that with sex and marriage he also affirms singleness as a really great thing. So I know when you come into youth group and young adult ministry sometimes the big questions are will I marry? Will I have a life partner? And some of the attitudes that lie in the background and aren't helpful attitudes are attitudes like I'm not complete unless I am married, unless I am in relationship.

[25 : 54] And right through this passage the apostle affirms the goodness of singleness in its own right as opposed to marriage. It's a counter-cultural value.

Steve told me the other day that with regard to widows in the Roman Empire if a woman was widowed she was only allowed to remain a widow for two years or she was fined if she hadn't remarried.

So to affirm singleness is actually to affirm a counter-cultural value and say this is a state before God which is complete and whole and valid and from which the Lord Jesus Christ can be fruitfully served.

I think he's really careful not to put singleness over marriage or marriage over singleness and yet at the same time when you get down to the very end he will say that there are a lot of advantages to singleness in terms of serving Christ.

Might get to that in a minute. I'd like to get to that in a minute. So when you look at the sheet, the mud map, the lines below are the separation between different places in life that we might find ourselves.

[27 : 08] Verses 10 to 11 is probably a really important one. In most of those there's a place for being content. The one that's different are maybe people who are considering divorce. So he's speaking, not saying everything that there is to be said about divorce but he's speaking to people in church who could be considering divorce and he's saying divorce is not the way out of marriage.

If you're going to separate for a time if things are really tough and sometimes in a marriage they are really tough but don't separate thinking I can just change horses and go to someone else. Separate

with the intention of reconciliation or remain single.

But it's speaking to the devious mind, the person who's manipulating here to try and get out of marriage because it's just not working and he's saying no and he has the Lord's authority in that. There's some wonderfully reassuring stuff. There's people here who are married to unbelievers. I'm going to say to you tonight if you're a believer don't marry an unbeliever. But if you have married an unbeliever and it's by your own choice then be reassured here by what's said.

Or if you've become a Christian along the way after maybe starting marriage with both of you not knowing the Lord and then one of you comes to the Lord the question that gets asked is should I get out of this relationship because it's not really holy before the Lord.

[28 : 27] And the answer from the passage is so clear. Stay in it if your partner is willing to live with you because you have a sanctifying influence and impact on your spouse and on your children.

You have an influence. You bring the gospel good to bear in this marriage in which you live and before God it is a valid marriage and a place where you ought to remain and find contentment. And that's the theme that runs right through here. So if you look at the sheet the mud map it's sort of a violet colour but right through in every circumstance here there is the notion of contentment like being content where you are.

And I think that makes sense of the middle bit because he goes off and talks about circumcision and slavery and says if you've been circumcised you don't need to be uncircumcised. And any guy thinking about that goes well that's good because that only sounds painful and I don't even know how you do it.

And if you're a slave there's a sense of contentment. If you've got an opportunity to come out of slavery we'll take the opportunity but otherwise be content. And that feeds into the next bit from verse 25 on where it says if you're bound to a wife don't seem to be loosed.

[29 : 41] Don't seek to be loosed. And if you're not married don't seek to be bound. In other words be content in the stage of life that you're in. And I think when you look at that part when you're in verses 25 to 40 you get a picture there that maybe helps us in young adult and youth ministry because as I said before you know how sometimes you think this is all about pairing up and there's all sorts of acronyms out there for hatching and matching and dispatching and it's obvious at this stage of life when people do marry they do come together they do get interested in one another there's something really nice about all that there's nothing wrong with all of that.

But sometimes people come to that driven like really needy I've got to be married. If I haven't got a relationship I'm not complete. And I think what he's urging here is a contentment in where we are and actually you make yourself a more presentable marriage prospect by being secure and content in serving the Lord in the state of life that you're in.

And sometimes people who come across as really needy are people who come across as maybe carrying problems and difficulties and setting themselves up for going into a relationship which is a really bad relationship for them.

But throughout this section see I haven't gone into the detail of the passage I'm not reading that again but he's really affirming that if you do get married it's not a sin. If you do enter into a relationship a marriage relationship and sex is part of that it's a normal part of that it's not a sin it's not to be despised it's not unholy it is not less.

But if you are a young person or an older person and you're not married and you are content in that place firstly saying be content with who you are and where you are be content in your singleness and he will add to it even more because he will say he will say that there are distinct advantages in the single life.

[31 : 45] Married people have troubles. Anybody who's married here my wife confirmed this very readily for me this morning but married people have to sort things out between themselves. It's not always pure bliss.

One high bedroom high to another is life you know in the terms of the world it's just not quite like that. But when it's working there is a deep place of security and comfort and things that God does give.

And marriage itself is like the world itself it's coming to an end. Everything's winding down and I often say that when I marry somebody sometimes people get upset with me for this but the only way a good marriage will end is sadly.

It's going to come to an end with the death of one of the spouses. And marriage is not eternal it doesn't go into eternity so when people say I can't wait to be reunited in heaven well there is a

sense of being reunited in heaven with the body of believers and face to face with the Lord. But Jesus himself says you don't understand the scriptures to the Sadducees in heaven there won't be marriage or being given in marriage. Because they've come to Jesus and asked a really tricky question. Jesus there's this woman she's been married to seven different men whose wife is she going to be in heaven.

[33 : 12] Well life is pretty complicated and there are people like that and that question stands. Well Jesus says in heaven there's no marriage or being. So marriage itself is going to finish. It's a temporary relationship.

And it's going to end sadly and there's going to be problems and heartache and perhaps that problem and heartache won't just be in your own relationship it will be with your children and the challenges of life that come to you through those things.

So he's saying there are reasons for the single life you're not distracted by the things of married life and you are freer to serve the Lord in those ways. But he's very careful I think not to exalt singleness over marriage or marriage over singleness but he will validate both.

So I think the aha even since I preached this this morning the aha for me is the journey from chapter 6 of 1 Corinthians to chapter 7 is this journey from porneia immorality selfishness to a journey of in relationship now of selflessness that you see in chapter 7.

And it's like this whole body of people that have been converted out of the world they carry all the world with them they've come from all sorts of stuff that if you had to put it up on the projector and show us in church tonight for any of us we'd be embarrassed by.

[34 : 36] But made clean justified sanctified washed new beginning and in this new beginning it's a journey from selfishness to selflessness which is the way of the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ the selflessness of Christ transforming our world view on the place of sex and making us content with who we are and where we are in life right at this moment.