

God, Marriage, & Singleness

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[0:00] The following message was given at a Sunday celebration at Trinity Grace Church in Athens. For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at TrinityGraceAthens.com.

! 1 Corinthians 7, verse 1. 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.

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, one of another.

[1:23] To the unmarried and the widows, I say that it is good for them to remain single, as I am. But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Please be seated. There are indeed no ordinary Sundays.

As I began working on this message, I did what anyone in my shoes would do. I asked for help. As we go through this inspired book of the Bible, we find ourselves in this amazing text.

So I wanted to read and understand what was going on here. And do you know what I found?

Almost every book I read about marriage puts intimacy at the end of the book.

Even when books that advertise that's what the content is about, the authors first highlighted the theology behind it. Why? Why? Why do the wise authors do this?

[2:32] Do they just need to fill content so they add all this extra stuff at the beginning only to answer people's questions at the end? Do they just keep reading? I don't think so.

Christians will pick up these books for a variety of reasons, but usually it's because they have specific questions. How can I be healed from this?

What do I do about that? And so many questions stick in our minds. But even though our questions are often valid, they need to be informed first with theological principles.

These Christian authors know it's not just a matter of when, where, and how, but the more important question is why and what for. We need understanding and wisdom and principles, like with anything, more than just do this, don't do that.

That's always been true, even in Paul's time. And what we know from our text is that the Corinthian church wrote to Paul asking very specific questions.

[3:40] Now, in the back half of this letter, Paul's finally getting around to answering them. Not because he was delaying, but because he was laying theological groundwork.

And when Paul says, now concerning the matter, he says this a few times in the book to refer to the fact that he's answering their questions.

And when he says that, that's what he's doing. Now I'm going to answer your questions. Paul's a wise and inspired author who wants to impart understanding. And when you read these verses in light of previous chapters that we've gone through about unity and love for one another and how your body is not your own, we see that marriage and singleness is not just about marriage and singleness.

It's about God. It's about serving others. So I think the main point for us today in this text is glorify God in your body by embracing his gift and giving yourself wholly to him.

Glorify God in your body by embracing his gift and giving yourself wholly to him. The Lord assigns our lot in life. And whether you're married, single, or widowed, or divorced, you don't have to change your status in order to glorify the Lord.

[5:01] You can do that right now just as you are. We're all called to say no to self-focus and to give ourselves completely to God and to our spouse if we're married.

So glorify God in your body by embracing his gift and giving yourself wholly to him. I'm going to draw out three points that will guide our time. Point number one, a misunderstanding of God's gift. A misunderstanding of God's gift. Paul is continuing his argument from the last chapter. In the previous verses, Paul says, flee immorality.

Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you. You were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body. This is the theological underpinning of his argument. And then the natural response to that is, but how do I glorify God in my body?

And Paul says, now concerning, now concerning the matters about which you wrote. Paul's switching gears, but he's very much continuing the train of thought that he had in previous chapters.

[6:09] And the question they have is, is it good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman? And verse one is almost certainly a quotation from the Corinthians to Paul.

It may have been like a maxim that they had or a common saying among Roman citizens. He's quoting it back to them for reference about what he's talking about. And they want to know the details and the nature of abstinence, even in marriage.

As Paul addresses their misunderstandings, may we remember that God is graciously speaking to us today as well. He wants to give us clarity and understanding.

This is how you glorify God in your body. And the Lord places the answer in the context of marriage and singleness. Now what is up with the question that they had? What's up with that?

It's difficult to say exactly what was going on in Corinth at that time. Many in this Roman colony were influenced by the culture around them.

[7:15] The Gnostic view. This Gnostic view claimed that true spirituality has nothing to do with the body. The only thing that matters was the inner person, the spirit.

The body was completely inconsequential. And the Roman men erroneously thought that it was totally acceptable to be with someone else who was not their wife. Because the body doesn't matter.

And this idea may have infiltrated the church. Men were using their wives only for procreation and providing the family with legitimate heirs. But for enjoyment, they'd be with somebody else.

This was just really the norm for the patriarchal culture. This was par for the course. Only men had rights. And only freed men at that.

Women had no rights whatsoever. None. None. This was the culture. Very different than ours. So what is the answer then to their question?

[8:18] Is it good for a man not to have relations with a woman? Well, it depends. The Corinthian men had it backwards. Outside the limitations of marriage, it's absolutely to be rejected.

Absolutely to be rejected. But in the protection of biblical marriage, it's to be embraced. Essentially, some of these Corinthians were taking God's gifts and indulging themselves in this gift outside of its proper place.

Last week, Walt said that intimacy is like a fireplace. A fire kept within the boundaries of a fireplace can bring warmth and benefit to a home. But you build a fire in the middle of your kitchen floor and you burn your house to the ground.

Outside the boundaries of the fireplace causes damage. All of God's good gifts have boundaries and limitations. We tend to set fires in the middle of our kitchen floor.

We go outside the boundaries of pure enjoyment of God's gifts. Or we reject the gifts altogether.

Good gifts, yet with boundaries. Some of the Corinthians were rejecting this good gift of exclusivity with their spouse and going outside the boundaries of marital love.

[9:38] And I think there's a temptation in all of us to gravitate toward one of these two heirs. Either we're tempted to abuse God's gifts or we reject them altogether.

We typically think about enjoying food, drink, or sex. But gluttony, drunkenness, and immorality are an abuse of these things.

But we can do that with rest, relaxation, or money. Good gifts that could be abused. Or we can reject the gift altogether.

Food isn't just utilitarian to give us nourishment. A good steak tastes amazing. Or mushroom for you vegetarians. Intimacy isn't only for procreation.

It's about renewing the marriage covenant and marital love. So in what way might we indulge in God's gifts, turning them into something they were not meant to be?

[10:40] Or perhaps you've had it with the culture and want to live like a monk and reject all the pleasures that God gives.

May I remind us that the Lord gave us the capacity to enjoy life, didn't he? In order to not indulge ourselves, but so that we would get a taste of what it means to experience the pleasures of God, the enjoyment of the Lord.

Every one of God's gifts points to something else. They're given so that we can better serve others. They're not an end to themselves.

So what do we do with the life God has given us? We use it up to serve others and enjoy doing that along the way.

I've heard Walt say this. You have to spend your life. Go on the date. Have the hard conversation.

Book an adventure. Build a zip line. Jump in the water. Start a business.

[11:41] Make a million dollars. Give it all away. Commit to the community. Date your spouse. Call your mom. Read a book to your kids. Adopt a child. Learn another language. Laugh with your friends until you cry.

Eat the donut. Plan a church. Give your heart away again and again. So good. It's probably the only time I've ever quoted Walt twice in a sermon, but I guess there's a first for everything.

Bottom of the barrel. Bottom of the barrel. I don't know. Enjoy life within God's limitations while you spend it on others. We're made in God's image. Body and soul.

They matter. Point two. Marriage is a gift. Marriage is a gift. Paul gets a lot done in a short amount of time.

There's a great economy of words here. He doesn't say everything, but God gives us what we need in these verses. Paul says that each man should have his own wife. That does not mean that each and every man should have a wife or that all women need husbands.

[12:56] In fact, a few sentences later, Paul says just the opposite, that not everyone should marry. But having a spouse in this way means maintaining physical intimacy with the one you already have.

And the essence of what Paul is getting at is about giving yourself away wholly to your spouse. Paul says that your spouse is to be the object of your love, affection, attention, and that's reserved for them alone.

This is a total giving of yourself. You don't reserve one part of you for your spouse and another part for somebody else. Like when you buy a house, the wife gets the kitchen, you lock yourself in the bedroom, and the key to the den goes to somebody else.

It would be ridiculous. Your whole life belongs to one another. And these verses speak fervently about reciprocity, both parties giving.

Look down there. He says likewise in verses 3 and 4. He says it twice. The husband should give to his wife and likewise the wife to her husband.

[14:04] The wife does not have authority of her own body, verse 4, but the husband does likewise. The husband does not have authority of his body. He says it twice. There's an equality in giving.

Husbands and wives giving themselves, your body, your heart, every part of us. And so when Paul says that a wife does not have authority over her own body, no one in that culture would have raised an eyebrow.

Of course women don't have authority over their own body. They have no rights. That was the culture. Very different than ours. But what was radical for them was that men don't have authority over their bodies either.

The husband and wife each own something of the other one. Absolutely stunning is this comment by Paul. But the modern person may think this is a disaster waiting to happen.

An open door for abuse. A wife doesn't have authority over her body. We can't actually believe that or a woman would be taken advantage of. But Paul says not so fast. Not so fast.

[15:17] Wives have rights too. This is what's so radical. It's this mutuality and ownership that protects us. Both spouses meaning to serve the other.

Not take what you want, but give yourself away. The joy is for both of them. We don't look to our spouse to just gratify our desires.

But we seek to serve the other. Their joy is your joy. Elizabeth Elliot has wisely said that it's impossible to draw the line between giving and receiving.

It's impossible to draw the line between giving and receiving. Think about that. Your spouse, your spouse's joy is wrapped up in yours. This is not just the heart of the Christian marriage.

This is the heart of the Christian life. Others' joy is wrapped up in your joy. Christ said, for the joy set before him, he endured the cross. What is that? He didn't enjoy the cross.

[16:18] He enjoyed knowing us, bringing us to himself. This is at the heart of the Christian life. Jesus really said it is better to give than to receive. And so when we serve, when we give, God pours out his love into our hearts.

We're modeling his heart. Christ came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life. And so we cannot boil the husband and wife relationship down to obligation.

It's our joy to serve. Jesus said, my food is to do the will of him who sent me. It should be the joy to do what we're called to do.

Now, scripture does speak of what is owed to one another, rights or duty.

But there's no place for a spouse to make demands of their rights. If a man says to his wife, you owe this to me, that's shameful.

[17:24] That's shameful. Or if a wife is withholding in order to manipulate or get something from her husband, that's horrible.

In marriage, we give ourselves away freely. Our mind, our heart's affection in our body. All of us belong to the other. This is the heart of the one flesh union.

Seek ways to be patient with love and respect. Live a life to please your spouse in the kitchen, the living room, and the bedroom. Not to make demands of your rights. The Lord called us to pursue this and outdo one another in showing honor.

Paul says, Romans 12, Owe no one anything except to love each other. For the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.

We are not keeping tabs. We're not keeping score in marriage. We're not demanding rights. Eager to give, to love, mutual pursuit.

[18:38] Paul reiterates this point again in the first half of verse 5. Don't deprive one another. That word deprived really means to rob or steal. And the idea is we can rob one another in one of two ways.

We can deprive by, we can rob by taking or we can rob by withholding. Both is considered stealing from the other. And in the second half of verse 5, the Lord reminds us that we have a spiritual enemy.

That we actually resist by our one flesh union. That's an amazing thought. And of course, there are times when normal relations stop. But it's even more amazing in the middle of verse 5 as to why they should stop.

Paul's been talking about mutuality. I belong to you. You belong to me. Heart, mind, body. But there's something else in mutuality that Paul mentions.

And for the husband and wife, it's about when to press pause. And the reason is for prayer. There's a lot of reasons that husbands and wives give for not maintaining intimacy.

[19:51] And prayer is not usually one of them. Both of you may agree to abstain for a time because the matters at hand demand more attention.

The spiritual matters at hand demand more attention. But notice how reluctant Paul is to allow this concession. Look back at verse 5. Accept perhaps by agreement for a limited time.

And he says, but come back together. And verse 6 is also seen, most commentators say, it actually points backwards and not forwards. He's saying this is a concession, not a command.

Regularly so important that even prayer seems to be barely a reason to stop it. But it can be good to pause and consider what are the spiritual enemies of your marriage.

What are the spiritual enemies of your marriage? 1 Peter 3 says, Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered.

[21:09] Have you had times where it feels like the Lord's not here in your prayers? God resists the proud.

God resists the proud. And often when a husband is cruel or demanding, or a wife, the other spouse can retreat and nurse their own wounds.

And in this environment, self-pity, hardness of heart could easily set in. We retreat to isolation or mental escape. But dependence on the Lord can win a spouse.

Aiding streak in the Lord can win a spouse. Your spouse is a wonderful gift, and they are co-heirs of Christ with you. Oh, remind them of this.

Remind, you're a co-heir with me. Sometimes it's helpful to say, you're not my enemy. I've just said that before. We're not enemies here. It would be easy to forgive.

[22:15] I want to offer forgiveness easily. May consider a fast in intimacy for praying about the spiritual enemies in your marriage. Or in times of prayer, it may be good to consider the practical things that compete with your marriage.

Our private lives are like a closet. Not meant to be seen, but they can become places of neglect, disorganization, and filled with piles of mess.

I've heard it said that in marriage, there's like a circle drawn around a husband and wife. And nothing else belongs in the circle except the husband.

I mean, the Lord's there. But husband and wife belong only in the circle. I'm talking about the primacy of just marriage in general. If a husband and wife are in the circle, what else are you willingly bringing in?

What's competing for your affections and attention? Husband, does it feel like she's getting the scraps of your time and attention tacked on at the end of the day like an addendum, an add-on?

[23:18] Wives, could it be that your husband feels like he's got the leftovers of your energy? What good things might you need to let fall by the wayside that might be competing with your spouse?

Is your family overcommitted? These are practical things to consider. Do kids regularly take precedence? Do you feel like your schedule is out of control? Is your marriage suffering because of it?

So many things that we could pray about. Devote time to pray and ask God to help you. A friend of mine said that when he was a manager at Circuit City. Tells you how long ago that one was.

He was a manager at Circuit City. A supervisor told him, when you leave work, shake out all your troubles in the bush and don't take it home. I was like, that's pretty good. That's good advice.

Something about that. The happiness of a marriage isn't mainly physical.

The truest, most pure kind of love was designed by God for our good and then displayed on the cross. And that's the love we need in our marriage. Selfless, attentive, generous, patient.

[24:23] Because God has been so patient with us. Point number three. Singleness is a gift. Singleness is a gift.

To contrast Paul's emphasis on marital love and unity, Paul makes it clear that you don't have to be married to be a whole person.

There's good news. Married people don't have an inside track to God's heart more than singles or widows. You don't glorify God better because you're married, simply because you're married.

In fact, Paul says that he wishes all were like he is, unmarried. But in this, Paul realizes that most people are not going to be like he is. Most will get married.

But neither is a better moral good than the other. Each has its giftedness. As he says in the second half of verse 7. Look down there. I wish that all were as myself.

[25:32] But each has his own gift from God. One of one kind and one of another. Paul's neither commanding singleness nor marriage.

The Lord assigns our status, our lot. And he gives each one the grace that enables that life. But why does Paul say that singleness is a gift?

Each has his own gift from God. Both single and married. And again, verse 8, he says, it's good for them to remain single. And this is not a moral good, but an advantageous good.

There are advantages to being single, just as there are advantages to being married. But the advantage is primarily for both how we serve the Lord.

In marriage, we get to serve our spouse. And in singleness, we get to serve the Lord with undistracted devotion. I'm sure we've all seen the marriage stats in the past few years.

[26:41] There are now more unmarried people in the United States than there are married individuals. And the average age a person gets married is climbing. By and large, this is the culture around us because marriage is denigrated.

It's seen in some ways as a negative. But why? Why isn't marriage valued in the culture around us? And I think it's because many young people are asking marriage to do for them what it was never meant to do.

Does it make me happier? Does it make me more fulfilled? Is it convenient to my life? Marriage in that way is seen just as another pursuit of self-satisfaction.

And singleness is seen in that same light. And since many don't want to be encumbered by the burdens of a husband, wife, kids, responsibility, they avoid it like the plague. And so in our culture, singleness then has become the epitome of I want to do my life, my way.

I don't want to settle down, grow old, and get fat. So the gift of singleness becomes a means to serve yourself. But that's not what Paul means by the gift of singleness.

[27:58] Being married is good. Being single is good. Not for the ultimate end of making you happy. The point, they both point to something else.

Done well, they both point to God's glory. Each is a gift that he bestows and each has its own challenges. Christopher Yuan has said, Understanding singleness as a gift means you don't have to be special or uniquely called to know the state of singleness is good.

Also, you can have the gift of singleness and have a desire to marry. The gift of singleness doesn't necessarily mean it's lifelong. Nor does it mean it'll be easy or you'll always be happy.

It'll be difficult, just as being married brings trials. However, trials and difficulties don't diminish the goodness of either. That's so good.

The real gift is in the ability to serve God. Not being free and unencumbered in and of itself. But free to serve the Lord better.

[29:12] But singleness done well is incredibly difficult in our culture. Even if being single has become the norm, abstinence is not the norm.

It's weird. In the 1980s and 90s, there was an NBA player who had busted every previously held record.

He had busted a previously held record by most consecutive games played back-to-back. And for those of you who love NBA, we got two references today. Most consecutive games back-to-back. A.C. Green still holds that record with 1,192 consecutive games played in a row without missing one. In fact, in his 15-year career in the NBA, Green only missed three games due to surgery on his thumb.

His teammates nicknamed him Iron Man because he was so tough. He played through injuries. This is a remarkable feat that probably won't ever happen again. But he was also known for something else.

[30:18] Green was a Christian. He was a believer. And when he came to Los Angeles Lakers in 1986, he came to the Showtime Lakers.

These guys were known for their wild lifestyle, their parties. And A.C. was not married, and he was pure.

And when the team found out, oh, the bets they made, how long he's going to last. And so they tempted him every chance they could. It was terrible. But A.C. retired in 2001, never gave in, and shortly after got married.

And now his former teammates look back and say that A.C.'s abstinence may have been an even greater feat than 1,100 consecutive games. Being single can make you feel like your back's up against the wall at times.

The world, your own flesh, and the devil are against you. But the Lord gives grace. The Lord gives grace.

[31:23] I'm reminded of Martin Luther's hymn. It says, Did we in our own strength confide? Our striving would be losing were the right man not on our side.

The man of God's own choosing. Oh, you ask who that may be? Christ Jesus, it is he. The Lord of hosts, his name. He invites you to himself. The Lord of hosts.

From age to age the same. And he must win the battle. Oh, he must win the battle. He is the right man on your side.

The Lord is faithful. And he is good to you. He is good to his people. In ancient times, marriage and children, it was the main way to achieve significance.

Children would take care of you. Your future was guaranteed. And singleness was a curse. Women had no rights.

[32 : 29] And widows were worst of all. If they had no family, they were less than nothing. But Paul singles out the widows in verse 8. To the unmarried and the widows.

He singles them out. He gives legitimacy to a non-entity. They were nothing. Again, this is absolutely radical in this culture.

And because of the gospel, and because you don't have to change your status to glorify God, widows too were encouraged to remain single. Paul was single. Jesus himself, the most fully human that ever was, was single.

And it's not that widows were then relegated to a life of severe poverty. The emphasis is that the church should be the one taking care of them. In whatever state you're in, there will be no shortage of family members in the church, in God's kingdom.

Spiritual mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, the church, the family of God, taking care of one another, loving one another as family in God's kingdom.

[33 : 40] So the widow, who is less than nothing, is not left without hope in God's kingdom. This is good news for us all. Thank the Lord for it. Marriage then is not, marriage then is not about social stability or personal fulfillment.

Marriage and all its expressions of love were created to reflect the ultimate love relationship and union with the Lord. Again, it points forward.

It's a shadow and foretaste of the future. It all points forward to the ultimate marriage supper of the Lamb. Our hearts were made for union and communion with the Lord.

Marriage is not the ultimate. Christ is. Christ is the ultimate. Christ is the ultimate. Paul says here at the end that it is better to marry than to burn with passion.

Marriage is not meant to fix sin. That's easy to see. That's not its purpose. If it did fix it, then there wouldn't be any affairs. Husbands and wives would never struggle again with lust.

[34 : 49] But that's just not what happens. Women, if, single women, if a man says that he wants to marry because he doesn't want to burn with lust, then run in the other direction.

Verse 9 doesn't give you a pass on self-control. I think he means more like intense emotions. But some have taken this to mean, see, I don't have to have self-control. I need to get married instead. No, that's not the reason to marry. As one author observed, a lack of self-control before marriage means a lack of self-control in marriage. Run from this.

Romans 12 says, I appeal to you, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.

When we present our bodies as God as a living sacrifice, it's a joy to worship him. He's the prize. It's not an idyllic view of marriage or singleness or family.

[35 : 54] So what do we prize? Friend, if you're single and you desire to get married and it's not happening, I want to remind you, God's not withholding anything from you.

He's gracious. He's generous. He desires to fill you with joy. As you give yourself to him. And let me also say that we do have a lot of singles in our church who serve the Lord with wholehearted devotion.

Thank God for you. So thankful for you. Your love for people and your pure devotion to the Lord is pleasing to God.

Keep pressing on in love. And you may not have asked to be in the place where you find yourself. The Lord determines our lot. You may not have asked to be here. Whether you're married or single. Or widowed. It may feel like a curse. Like a gift you get at Christmas that you put in the re-gift category.

[37 : 14] Just get it as far away from me as possible. You may feel burdened or overwhelmed. Discouraged by persistent sin that keeps coming up.

Or sin that just seems to find you when you're not looking for it. But God says to each one of us, I am with you. I'm with you.

God's steadfast love will never betray you. And if you wonder if he can ever accept you, he made a pass for you to receive his love and perfect forgiveness.

