

“Each Has His Own Gift from God”

The Twelfth in a Series of Sermons on Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians

Texts: 1 Corinthians 7:1-16; Deuteronomy 24:1-4

From a Christian perspective, paganism often leads to some form of self-indulgence. But paganism can also lead people to reject things which God ordains, and which are intended for our use and enjoyment. If the soul is pure and trapped in the prison of the body, as the Greek pagans were teaching, then the body is the source of both physical desires and sinful urges. And if the body is bad, then people will either indulge its every urge (as many in Corinth were doing), or else deny it any pleasure—even when that pleasure is ordained and blessed by God. This too is a problem in Corinth, especially when it comes to marriage, of all things. The Corinthians are confused about this and have written to Paul about asking for clarification. Which he does.

As we continue our series on Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, we now move into that section of the letter in which Paul addresses some of the specific subjects about which the Corinthians had written Paul requesting additional information and clarification (7:1). The first of these matters concerns marriage (chapter 7), before Paul turns to the subject of idolatry, beginning in chapter 8.

As we have seen, the Greco-Roman world was thoroughly pagan in terms of the prevailing sexual mores. Denial of the biblical ethic usually took one of two directions. The first direction is toward sexual promiscuity (including fornication and adultery). Not only was it common for men to keep mistresses, concubines, and engage in adulterous behavior (7:2), it was not uncommon for people to procure the services of temple prostitutes. Paul has already addressed this topic in chapter 6, urging all Christians to flee from sexual immorality, and he has urged the Corinthian church to discipline those who engage in such behavior, but who refuse to repent and in doing so bring scandal to the church.

Another issue associated with pagan sexuality is asceticism and the denial of sexuality. Celibacy was stressed in certain quarters in the Greco-Roman world because it was thought that those who mastered all bodily urges were able to keep their souls pure from earthly defilement. This is typical of pagan dualism. It is easy to see how this would be an attractive option for Greeks who converted to Christianity, only to discover the biblical prohibitions against sexual immorality. This was clearly an issue among the Corinthians and, apparently, a number of them had questions about how celibacy relates to the biblical sexual ethic. Complete celibacy—even in marriage—was pushed by some as the norm for Christians.

Paul informs the Corinthians that while celibacy is “good” under certain circumstances, and while there are certain advantages to remaining celibate, according to 1 Corinthians 11:11, marriage is the normal human condition. Marriage can bring greater completeness while removing certain temptations. In 1 Corinthians 7:26, Paul speaks of the great distress in the church due to rampant sexual immorality, as the current climate in Corinth only exacerbated sexual temptation for those who were struggling. As Paul sees it, celibacy is a gift from God and is one way of dealing with the pressures coming from pagan immorality. While Paul prefers to remain celibate himself—he is probably widowed by this time—he does not command celibacy, but recommends it for those whom God has called to this status in life.

There are several common misconceptions about Paul’s instructions which we will need to address

before going through the details of the passage.¹ Paul is not writing a systematic treatise on marriage. Rather, he is responding to specific questions posed by the Corinthians in their letter. This means Paul is answering the questions the Corinthians put to him, not the questions we may put to him which deal with issues in the modern world. The slogan, ‘it is . . . [good] for a man not to touch a woman’ (v. 1) does not come from Paul, but from the Corinthians. This is not Paul’s advice as some have understood this passage—it is a slogan coming from the lips of those who misunderstood Paul’s reasons for celibacy.²

Paul’s advice is remarkably common-sensical. His point is that people should remain in the condition they were in when the Lord called them. You cannot unscramble eggs. Those who are married should remain married—even if they are married to unbelievers. Those who are celibate by choice should remain celibate. There is no biblical command to marry, and there are certain advantages to celibacy. Those who are single and struggling with sexual immorality, should seek to marry, because it is better to marry than to burn with passion. The church should take people where we find them, and then seek to move them forward, rather than seek to undo all the mistakes and sins of the past as some would advocate.

In verse 1, we learn that this discussion arises from correspondence sent by the Corinthians to Paul (while he was in Ephesus), and that at least some of the Corinthians were approving of the following slogan and applying it even to marriage.

Paul writes, “*Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: “It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.”* The phrase as literally translated should be rendered, “it is good for a man not to touch a woman,” which is a euphemism meaning to have sexual relations with a woman.³ The expression never means “to marry,” and the reason some commentators⁴ and English translations (i.e., the NIV), interpret this as referring to marriage is because they mistakenly assume that Paul is generally endorsing the principle of celibacy, rather than refuting the erroneous notion held by certain people in the church that even married people should abstain from sexual relations, as the slogan clearly indicates.⁵

This is the case as becomes clear when Paul writes in verses 2-4: “*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.*” While Paul will make clear that under certain conditions the avoidance of sexual relations is a good thing—someone called to celibacy, or someone waiting to be married—this does not apply to those already married, as some of the Corinthians were teaching.

Paul’s point is simple and very straight-forward. Since immorality is such a great problem—the temptation to return to pagan ways is great and many people were giving in to it—married people should

¹ Hayes, First Corinthians, 112.

² See Hayes, First Corinthians, 112.

³ Hayes, First Corinthians, 113.

⁴ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 101-102.

⁵ Hayes, First Corinthians, 113; Fee, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 270-271.

be clear about the fact that a husband and wife “have” authority over each other’s bodies. This is not only a strong affirmation of monogamy,⁶ but because sexual temptation is so great, married couples must not heed this wrong-headed advice and abstain from sexual relations, since doing so only increases the temptation toward marital infidelity. Rather it is the biblical duty of husbands and wives to enjoy the marital relationship (v. 3). Withholding marital favors is highly problematic as Paul will go on to say in verse 10. It not only does great harm to the marriage and can lead to divorce (desertion), but it creates a situation where the temptation toward marital infidelity is greatly increased.

It is noteworthy, that in the ancient world (where wives were often regarded as property with few legal rights), Paul puts husband and wife on a parity of sorts. In Ephesians 5:22-33, Paul teaches that wives are to submit to the headship of their husbands, but he also teaches that the husband’s body belongs to his wife (and vice-versa). The verb Paul uses in verse 4 (ἐξουσιάζει) literally means to exercise authority over something, and does not refer to ownership. There are a number of important ramifications to this. Husbands and wives are sexual equals (which prevents one party from forcing the other party to do something offensive to them). This also reaffirms the point that sexual relations are indispensable to marriage (except in the case of distance or illness) and that those in the Corinthian church teaching that couples should abstain from marital relations within marriage are in error. Within the context of marriage, sexual relations do not defile the body.⁷ To teach otherwise is to adopt the pagan view of the body as evil and that the sexual urge is a “lower passion.” We are created as sexual beings and God has given to us a wonderful context in which these natural desires can be fulfilled and enjoyed.

There are times, however, in which abstinence is permissible, but only by mutual agreement. As Paul states in verse 5-6, “*Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. Now as a concession, not a command, I say this.*” Paul’s command is clear—do not deprive each other, except by mutual agreement. This is so a married couple can devote themselves to a specific time of prayer. But this should be done with great care, and for a limited duration so that spouses do not open the door to Satanic temptations (probably a reference to the connection in Corinth between temple prostitution and false religion) and because of a lack of self control on the part of either party to the marriage. Paul does not command a period of abstinence, but he does permit it, provided there is mutual consent.

In the next verse, Paul gives us some hints about his own biography. “*I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another.*” At the time of the writing of this epistle, Paul is single, probably a widower, since, according to the Mishnah, Jewish men were to be married and seek to have large families. According to Acts 26:10, Paul was probably a member of the Sanhedrin, and it is doubtful that a single man could have been made a member of the ruling council. Although it is possible that Mrs. Paul left him after his conversion, it is far more likely that Mrs. Paul had died. In any case, Paul states that he has the divine gift of celibacy and he wishes that others had it as well. This is probably a reference to the fact that many in the church were being told that celibacy was for all, and then found themselves burning with passion and falling victim to sexual temptation. Those with the gift of celibacy should remain celibate. “*To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single as I am.*”

⁶ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 102.

⁷ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 103.

Once the general rule of thumb has been established, Paul deals with specific cases, starting with the widowed and unmarried. If people in these particular circumstances have the gift of celibacy, then let them stay unmarried, as Paul now is. However, not everyone has the gift of celibacy, and those who do not have this gift should seek to get married. Some argue that Paul is referring here to widows and widowers (not unmarried people in general) whom Paul will specifically address in verses 25-38.⁸ This would limit Paul's advice here specifically to those who have lost spouses to death. If true, this clearly points to Paul's own status as a widower, "as I am." While this interpretation has much to commend it, the word translated "unmarried" (ἀγάμοι) is a broad term and includes all unmarried people.⁹ Paul is probably speaking to those who have lost spouses, as well as to those not yet married.

In verse 9, Paul addresses those who struggle with temptation. *"But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion."* For those who find being single a horrible burden—those whom Paul says cannot control themselves in the sense of facing constant temptation and struggle to avoid sexual sin—and who are not called to celibacy, then it is better for them to marry, rather than needlessly struggle with the lusts of the flesh (burning with the fire of passion). This is a command (imperative), rather than mere permission.¹⁰ Those who are widowed are permitted to remarry, and those who are single (without the gift of celibacy) are exhorted to marry in the Lord.

In verses 10-11, Paul now takes up the subject of divorce. *"To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife."* Not everyone is as Paul is, single. To those Christians who were already married, and who were tempted to leave their spouses upon discovery that sexual relations (not celibacy) were mandatory, Paul passes along a command of Jesus ("not I, but the Lord"). Although under Roman law, a woman could, under certain circumstances, instigate a divorce, but a Christian wife must not separate from her husband out of a desire to remain celibate. If she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband, who likewise must not divorce his wife for the same reason. This means that divorce is not an option to escape from marital obligation. Should one party leave the other—in this case, to escape the marital due, or in the case of which Jesus was speaking, where one divorces their spouse to marry another whom they prefer more—they must remain unmarried, or seek reconciliation with their current spouse.

There are several important issues here. This is one of the few places where Paul directly appeals to the teaching of Jesus (cf. 1 Corinthians 9:4; 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17), which at this point was a body of memorized sayings of Jesus (since the gospels were most likely not yet written). In Mark 10:2-12, Jesus addresses the subject directly—referring to Moses' provision for divorce in Deuteronomy 24:1-4 (our Old Testament lesson). Paul does not mention the exceptional cases (such as Jesus' permission of divorce in the case of adultery, Matthew 5:32; 19:9), or even divorce in the case of the desertion of a believing spouse by an unbeliever, a subject Paul is soon to take up in verse 15. No doubt, the early church (before the writing of the gospels) had access to the memorized teaching of Jesus.

⁸ Hayes, First Corinthians, 118-119.

⁹ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 105.

¹⁰ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 105.

It is also important to remember that Paul is not writing a systematic treatment on divorce or remarriage. Rather, Paul is dealing with the specific question raised by the letter from the Corinthians, and the case in view, where, in order to remain celibate and not defile the body, some believers might consider (or had considered) divorce preferable to continuing sexual relations.¹¹ Paul does not speak to the case of the victim of adultery (as Jesus does and as he will) or desertion. Paul's concern here is to stop people from initiating divorce because they think the body is evil, and they want to remain celibate.

Before working our way through the substance of Paul's discussion of this matter, first we ought deal with the comment Paul makes about the authority of what follows: "*I, not the Lord.*" Paul does not mean that what he affirms contradicts what Jesus has said. What Paul does mean is that Jesus did not speak to this specific situation. So what follows stems from Paul's own apostolic authority, which comports with that revealed by the Spirit of God (1 Corinthians 7:40—"I think that I too have the Spirit of God"). The church was cognizant of the memorized sayings of Jesus, and that these sayings were authoritative. But in cases where there is no such oral tradition, Paul speaks with apostolic authority. "*I, not the Lord.*"

The irony is that success of the Gentile mission created a whole series of pastoral problems. Paul must address a question which neither the Old Testament nor Jesus addresses, namely "what to do in those cases where one party in a marriage converts to Christianity while the other does not?" Should the Christian remain with a non-Christian spouse? Paul will address the subject of a Christian who seeks to marry a non-Christian later in 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1—don't do it!—but here he writes, "*To the rest I say (I, not the Lord) that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him.*"

This issue would have been a common one in Corinth, even as it can be in our own age. What happens in the case of those who marry before becoming Christians, and then one spouse comes to faith in Christ? If a Christian is married to an unbelieving wife, and she wishes to remain with her husband, Paul says, he is not to divorce her. The reverse is also true. If a woman has an unbelieving husband, she is not to divorce him because he is an unbeliever.

But this raises the question about children such marriages and their relationship to the covenant. If believers are not to leave unbelieving spouses, does such a situation mean that the marriage is somehow invalid, and that any children produced are excluded from membership in the covenant? Not at all. "*For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.*"

All Christian believers are "holy" and have been set aside by God for his purposes. This refers to all those who are married to unbelievers. Because they have been set apart for God's purposes, this "set apartness" extends in some limited sense to the unbelieving spouse. The fact that sanctification is emphasized in the sentence and is in the perfect tense (the set-apartness of sanctification is a continuing condition) means that the sanctification of a believing spouse extends not only to the unbelieving spouse, but also to the children. If this were not the case, this would render the children "unclean" and outside the covenant.

Paul is clear that the children of such unions are regarded as holy. Two things important things must be

¹¹ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 106.

said here. First, Paul’s comments about children being “holy” certainly points in the direction of the baptism of infants—children of a marriage with one believing spouse and one unbelieving spouse are not outside the covenant. And if small children are in the covenant, how can we deny to them the sign and seal of that covenant, which is baptism? Second, sanctification is used here in its primary sense of “set apartness” and not in the sense which so many take it, moral purity.¹² The “holy status” of the believing parent is not negated by the fact the one parent is an unbeliever—hence, children of such a union are still members of the covenant, and still eligible for baptism, even if one parent remains a pagan.

In verses 15-16, Paul addresses the case of what happens in the event that the unbelieving spouse chooses to leave the believing spouse, because of their faith in Jesus Christ. In verse 15, we read, “*But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace.*” Paul’s answer to this sad situation is very simple. If the unbeliever takes the initiative and leaves, the believing spouse is to let them do so, and no longer remains bound to them. The deserted party is free to remarry under such circumstances.¹³ The reason for this is that God has called us to live in peace. Believers are not to create situations in which they seek to dissolve their marriages. Since peace is the goal, believers are to remain with unbelievers if the unbelieving spouse does not desire to leave. But in those cases where unbelievers desert the believing spouse because the spouse is a believer, the believer is to keep the peace by letting them go. Paul says they are no longer bound.

Verse 16 is a bit harder to understand. “*For how do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?*” There are two interpretations offered to this verse. One is the so-called “optimistic view” in which it is held that the believer should remain as long as possible so as to bring about the conversion of the unbeliever. According to this line of thought is that this sentence should be “understood as encouragement to the believing partner to stay in a marriage even if there is no receptiveness to the gospel.”¹⁴ While this view is grammatically possible (and desirable to a point), it seems to go against the context.

Paul has written that believers are not to seek to cling to marriages when unbelievers seek to end them. This is hardly in line with Paul’s exhortation to keep the peace. Furthermore, God did not give marriage for the purpose of evangelism, although one partner’s conversion does not nullify either the marriage, nor negate the requirement for marital relations to continue. All that Paul seems to be saying here that the outcome regarding unbelieving spouses is uncertain.¹⁵ If they stay, they stay. If they leave, they leave.

What do we say by way of application?

Because pagans do not have a doctrine of creation (that God made all things good), and because they do not have a doctrine of the fall (that Adam’s sin brought the curse down upon the human race), they have no way to explain why human sexuality is a good thing, and yet why at the same time why our sexuality is so easily turned into a source of sin and temptation. God has ordained marriage as that

¹² Morris, 1 Corinthians, 107. See Hayes, First Corinthians, 121.

¹³ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 107.

¹⁴ Hayes, First Corinthians, 121-122.

¹⁵ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 108.

institution where men and women are to engage in sexual relations, and God sees fit to limit sexual relations to marriage. Those who are married are to remain married, give their spouse their marital due, and devote themselves to the preservation of the marriage. Should an unbelieving spouse leave because of someone's faith in Christ, well . . . Paul says "let them go."

But not all are called to marriage. Some are called to be single. They are to remain celibate, and if and when sexual temptation becomes too great, Paul says they should seek to be married. And whenever possible, people should seek to remain in that state in which they were in when they came to faith. After all, Paul says, "each has his (or her) own gift from God."

No doubt, Paul's doctrine of marriage reflects his view that Jesus has not only washed, sanctified and justified all of us, but as he points out in Ephesians 5, marriage is a picture to us of Christ's relationship to his church. As Christians, and as members of Christ's church, we are Christ's bride, whom even now he is purifying in preparation for the great marriage supper of Christ the lamb. In order to answer the Corinthian's question, Paul ties creation and redemption together, because that same one who created us as sexual beings (male and female), has also purchased us with his shed blood. And this is why we glorify God with our bodies, and this is why we are to be satisfied with our station in life.