



## The Good Gift of Marriage

No. 16

1 Corinthians 7:1-16

Series: 1 Corinthians

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Theodore Siu

### Text

*[1] Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman." [2] But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. [3] The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. [4] 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. [5] 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.*

*[6] Now as a concession, not a command, I say this. [7] 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.*

*[8] To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single, as I am. [9] But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion.*

*[10] To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband [11] (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife.*

*[12] 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. [13] If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. [14] 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. [15] 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. [16] For how do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?*

### Introduction:

- Arouse Interest:

- Webster's dictionary defines "puritanical" as "of, relating to, or characterized by a rigid morality." Some common synonyms for this listed are Victorian, prudish, straitlaced, stuffy.<sup>1</sup>
  - It's ironic that the Puritans were often portrayed as prudish and repressive. Because within their own context, the Puritans were some of the most pro-sex Christians of their world. While Erasmus argued that the best marriages were abstinent of sexual intimacy, the Puritans called such Roman Catholic teachings the doctrine of the devils (1 Tim. 4:1-3).
  - William Perkins argued that a married couple ought to be intimate, "by an holy kind of rejoicing and solacing themselves each with [the] other in a mutual declaration of the signs and tokens of love and kindness ([Prov. 5:18-19](#); [Song 1:1](#); [Gen. 26:8](#); [Isa. 62:7](#)).
  - There were even some recorded cases where some church members were excommunicated because they did not extend "due benevolence" to their spouse.<sup>2</sup>
- Surface Need:
    - Contrary to their portrayal, the Puritans were a pro sex people. I would argue that they were very pro sex, because they took the Bible seriously.
    - If you're new to Christianity, and you have this perception that the Bible is all about restrictions, you should take a look at the Song of Solomon sometime.
    - You'll realize real quick that God loves love. Romance is God's design. And while there are rules that God places around these things, the intent of these rules is for you to enjoy the good gifts God gives you to the fullest.
  - Orient To Text:
    - This is the truth that Paul is trying to persuade the Corinthians of here in our text today. As we saw in the last two weeks, many within the church of Corinth were indulging in sexual immorality. And Paul had strict rebukes for Christians who settled in their sin.
    - At the same time, there were others within Corinth who took pride in their rigid standards. Who thought they were more spiritually mature because of the restraint they showed in the face of physical pleasures, even legitimate forms of pleasure.
    - Paul doesn't approve of this either. While there is a place for self-denial within the Christian life, Paul never endorses a purely ascetic lifestyle. God gives his people genuinely good gifts in life. Good gifts that God's people are called to enjoy and be thankful for.
    - As we'll see in this section of our text, Paul argues that Christians ought to ***make the most of the good gifts God gives.***

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<sup>1</sup> "PURITANICAL Definition & Meaning - Merriam-Webster," n.d., <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/puritanical>.

<sup>2</sup> "The Puritan's View of Sex in Marriage," *Ligonier Ministries*, n.d., <https://learn.ligonier.org/articles/sex-in-marriage>.

- Organizational Sentence: Our sermon today is going to break down into two parts. Paul is first going to argue in verses 1-6 that Christians should make the most of their marriages. Then in verses 7-16, we're going to see that Christians are called to make the most of their lives.

### **Make the Most Of Your Marriage (1-6)**

- Paul writes in verse 1,
  - [1] Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman."
- Again, as I said last week, quotation marks are going to get really funky here. So if you don't have a Bible open in front of you, I'd recommend you get one from the back. If you are reading an NASB or a KJV, there are no quotation marks in verse 1.
- So it seems that what these translations are suggesting is that Paul himself thinks it is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman. If that is what Paul is saying, then what follows is Paul kind of begrudgingly admitting that if you really want to have sex, you are allowed to in marriage. But it's better if you abstain altogether.
- Now, here, I actually think the ESV is a better translation. Because here in putting these words in quotations, the ESV is suggesting that there are some Christians within Corinth who are saying that it is good to abstain from sexual activity even within marriage.<sup>3</sup>
- And Paul is pushing back against this. He's doing a similar thing here that he did in 6:12-13, where he raised a Corinthian objection and responded to it. What is Paul's response to this kind of rigid asceticism?
  - [3] The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. [4] 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.
- Friends, I want to make this very clear, especially in light of last week's emphasis on fleeing from sexual immorality. Within the confines of marriage, Paul is very pro sex.
  - Paul argues that within marriage, the husband and the wife owe one another their bodies. Paul says in verses 3 and 4 that each one has authority over the body of the other.
    - As a side note, this is also a very pro-women statement that Paul is making here in verse 4, especially in light of the patriarchal norms of the Greco-Roman world.

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries VOLUME 7 (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2018).

- Now, this doesn't mean that you get to force the other into sex if they don't want to. But it's very clear that God expected each person within a marriage to sometimes flex in order to best love and serve the other in the relationship.
- Even if you were thinking about abstaining from sex to fast and pray, Paul places all kinds of qualifications in verse 5 to ensure that the two get back together again.
  - Paul says you are to be in agreement when you do this. And you are to do this only for a limited time, "so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control (7:5)."
  - And even then, Paul says that this kind of fast is allowed, but it isn't commanded. Verse 6 doesn't belong with the paragraph below, but with the paragraph above.<sup>4</sup>
- By the way, this attitude isn't unique to Paul. The whole Bible celebrates intimacy within marriage as an inherently good gift from the Lord.
  - It's given by God for the pleasure of both spouses (Prov. 5:18-19)
  - For the procreation of children (Gen. 1:28)
  - For their mutual partnership (Gen. 2:23-25)
  - For the prevention of sin (1 Cor. 7:5)
  - And for the portrayal of Christ and his church (Eph. 5:32)
- As astounding as this sounds, the application of the text this morning is to make much of your marriage. Specifically, make much of God's good gift of sex within marriage.

#### Illustration

- Dave Ramsey is famous for helping people get out of debt and save money. He has various rules to take in the path to being financially free.<sup>5</sup>
- One day on his show, Dave received a call from a man who wanted to make an expensive luxury purchase. The man wanted to buy a million-dollar vacation home in Paris, but he was feeling a great deal of guilt over the purchase.
- Dave started to walk through the man's finances. How much money do you have saved up? Do you have any debt? What is your net worth? How much are you giving to others?
- But at some point in his assessment, it became clear that this guy was knocking it out of the park. Dave stops and tells the man, "Friend, buy the house! You should enjoy the fruits of your hard-earned labor. You've done things right, now make the most of it."

#### Application

- Friend, if you are married today, if you have made a solemn public covenantal commitment to your spouse before God and your community, you've made a big

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<sup>4</sup> Schreiner, *1 Corinthians*.

<sup>5</sup> *Is Purchasing a Vacation Home a Good Idea? - Dave Ramsey Responds*, 2021.

commitment. And God honors that by telling you to make the most of your marriage. To enjoy sex within your marriage.

- Paul's encouragement to Christian spouses is to have sex as often as you both would like. There's no need to feel guilty here. There's no need to abstain from sex for the sake of godliness. According to Paul, the godly thing for a couple to do is to enjoy the good gift of sex to the fullest.
- There are spiritual benefits to this as well. Paul says in verse 5 that the full enjoyment of this gift will be of use to the two in keeping them from the temptations of Satan.
- Now, this doesn't mean there aren't moments when you still will need self-control. If you've been married longer than a day, you realize real quick that sex isn't everything in marriage. And there are some days, weeks, months, where for one reason or another you can't have sex.
- Whether you are single or married, dating or divorced, the biblical command that each of us control our bodies in holiness and honor still applies. Having said that, there is a sense in which God gave us this gift of marriage to be an aid to us in our sexual purity. And if you're married, you ought to take advantage of this.
- God gave us the gift of sex, and He gave you the particular spouse and marriage you have for both of you to enjoy together. For as long as you both shall live.

### **Make the Most of Your Life (7-16)**

- So we've seen that God encourages us to make the most of our marriages this morning. But what if we are not married? Or what if we are in a marriage that just isn't as good as we thought it would be?
- After listing a general principle in verse 7, Paul then addresses people who are single in verse 8 and those who are in less-than-ideal marriages in verses 10 and 12. And Paul's advice to all of God's people, irrespective of our relationship status, is to make the most of the life God has given us.
- Paul writes in verse 7.
  - [7] 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.
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  - [8] To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single, as I am. [9] But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion.
- The way Paul talks about gifting here is important to understand. In Paul's writings, gifts seem to have to do both with ability and with circumstances of life.
  - In other words, singleness is a gift in the sense that some people are inclined to function well as a single Christian in the Lord. They have self-control. They don't really desire deeply to be married themselves. They can be content to live without a spouse. And singleness can be considered a gift in some sense, like this.
  - But in another sense, singleness is a gift in the sense that it's the circumstances in life that one finds oneself in. Jesus talks a little bit about this in Matt. 19:12.

- I think Paul can be read either way here, especially in his usage of the word passion here in verse 9. It can refer to the sense of desire, but it can also refer to the state of life you are actually in (1 Cor. 7:36). And both senses of giftings are important for us to understand.

### Application

- Just to say upfront, it's not a bad thing to want to be married. If you're here today and you really want to be married, that's nothing to be ashamed of. If you are at an appropriate age and life stage, you should pursue marriage.
  - Dating apps are an okay way to do this, but personally, from what I've seen, the best relationships generally come about when mutual friends introduce people together.
  - So if you would like to get married, I'd recommend talking to your friends in the church or mentors who can give you wisdom and who can recommend godly people for you to consider.
- At the same time, I also think there is a sense in which the circumstances of your life at this moment are right now the gift that God has given you. Being single is not a punishment from God. At the time of this letter, Paul himself was single, and he personally thought that his position in life was preferable to the state of marriage.
- Friends, there are real benefits to the gift of singleness. Benefits that you ought to consider. Benefits you ought to enjoy and thank God for, even if you don't want to be single forever.
  - If you're single, you may not have much money, but you have a lot more freedom to use your money however you like.
  - If you're single, you can do whatever you like with your free time.
  - If you're single, you have more time to make lasting and meaningful friendships with others.
  - If you're single, you can serve the Lord however you like. You can just go on that mission trip. You can spend long hours in prayer and study.
- I'm not saying that there aren't significant challenges to the single life. There are.
  - It is lonely to come home and eat and sleep alone.
  - It's hard to drive yourself to the doctor when you're sick, or to make yourself food when your stomach is upset
- I don't want to be glib and not acknowledge these kinds of sorrows in this life. Sorrows that the families of our church ought to take into consideration in our love and care for our fellow church members.
- At the same time, I also don't want you to walk away and think that singleness is terrible. There are pros and cons to the single life, just as there are to married life as well.
- And the best way to handle both singleness and marriage is to make the most of the good gift God has given you. It's not wrong to pursue marriage, but you will

- be much happier in marriage if you learn how to be content and happy apart from marriage. The best piece of marriage advice I've received is this, "Marriage doesn't change anything; it only amplifies what's already there in your heart."
- If you can appreciate the benefits of a single life and trust God with the very real challenges, then you will be able to appreciate the benefits of marriage more. You will be able to trust the Lord with the challenges of marriage. But if you can't give thanks to God now while you're single, you may find yourself having a hard time being grateful to God for a marriage that will always be less than ideal.

#### Explain

- As we see in verses 10-16, sometimes marriage can be messy.
- Starting in verse 10, Paul addresses those who are unsatisfied with their marriage. We don't know why people are unsatisfied, but it wouldn't be hard for us to imagine.
  - The wife just doesn't understand his struggles
  - The husband never listens to his spouse
  - The two always promise to change, but they never really do
  - And over time it just gets easy to believe that someone else somewhere else would make me happier than I am right now.
- Paul's answer to these people is pretty clear. Stay. Even if marriage isn't everything you thought it would be. Even if you can't stand the person. Even if you need to separate for a season, work to come back together again. Stay.
- Friend, if you're not content with this marriage, it's highly unlikely you'll be happy in another.

#### Illustration

- There's a study done by Judith Wallerstein, founder and executive director of the Center for the Family in Transition in Corte Madera, California, which sought to determine the long-term effects of divorce upon a family.<sup>6</sup>
- According to the study, only 1 in 7 of the former couples did the former wife and husband experience a stable second marriage.
- It kinda makes sense. If you can't find a way to live content with the sinner you're married to now, it's unlikely you'll be able to find a way to live content with the next sinner that comes along.
- On top of this, there are a host of other consequences that naturally come with divorce.
  - At the 10-year mark, the stress of being a single parent never lightens, and the fear of being alone never ceases.
  - One-half of the women and one-third of the men are still intensely angry at their former spouses despite the passage of 10 years.
  - Marriage brings order and security to people's lives, structure and security that is ripped away in divorce.

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<sup>6</sup> Wayne A. Grudem and ProQuest Information and Learning Company, *Christian Ethics : An Introduction to Biblical Moral Reasoning / Wayne Grudem*. (Crossway, 2018), <https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=3b4dc58e-ea22-3c09-8394-d1c83a055c79>.

- For both men and women, marriage in middle or later life provides an internal buffer against the anxieties of aging, of being old and alone, and of facing the inevitability of death. It also provides external support to cope with the increasing disabilities and infirmities of old age. When the structure is removed, former husbands and wives are left feeling extremely vulnerable.
- All children suffer from divorce. Children of all ages feel intensely rejected when their parents divorce. Children feel intense loneliness. Even when children are encouraged not to take sides, they often feel that they must. However, when they do take sides to feel more protected, they also feel despair because they are betraying one parent over the other. If they do not take sides, they feel isolated and disloyal to both parents.
- Friends, the consequences of divorce are catastrophic, not just to yourself but also to the people around you. If you are considering divorce today, I would urge you to reconsider. Talk to your spouse. Talk to a pastor. Talk to someone here who loves you both and can help walk with you through the difficulties of marriage. We don't expect everyone to have an easy marriage, and we're not surprised when the people in our church need help.

#### Explain

- Now, whenever we get around the topic of divorce, inevitably, we have to answer the question, "Is divorce ever permitted by God? Does the Bible ever give permission for divorce?"
- Some well-respected pastors would say no. Based on texts like 1 Cor. 7:10-11, Mark 10:11, and Luke 16:18, people in this camp would allow legal divorce for extreme circumstances of abuse or abandonment. But they would argue that in the eyes of God, the two people involved are still married. And they would counsel the two to either reconcile or stay single to hold out for future reconciliation. John Piper holds this position.<sup>7</sup> The late Voddie Baucham also believed this to be the case. I don't have time to thoroughly go through their case.<sup>8</sup> I would commend Piper's article on this position if you are interested. And if you would like to see the alternative perspective, Andy Naselli has written a thorough piece on this as well.<sup>9</sup>
- Personally, I do think 1 Cor. 7:15 does allow for divorce and remarriage in certain cases of abandonment. I think this position is also supported by Matt. 5:32 and 19:9, which allows for a divorce in cases of adultery.
- In context, 1 Cor. 7:12-16 deals with Christians who converted while already married to an unbeliever. And the question that Paul is addressing here is whether or not the Christian should stay in this marriage.

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<sup>7</sup> John Piper and John Piper, "Divorce & Remarriage: A Position Paper," *Desiring God*, 21 July 1986, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/divorce-and-remarriage-a-position-paper>.

<sup>8</sup> *The Permanence View of Marriage* 1 Voddie Baucham, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mUMmu-LaunQ>.

<sup>9</sup> Andrew David Naselli, "WHAT THE NEW TESTAMENT TEACHES ABOUT DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE" (n.d.).



- Paul says yes, you should. According to Paul, the Christian who is already within this kind of union has a sanctifying effect on his or her spouse and children. So they should stay and be faithful. And through their faithfulness, they should bear witness to Christ within their family.
  - Just as a side note, this is talking about those who married prior to their conversion. This isn't saying that Christians are allowed to marry unbelievers. The Bible is clear that this kind of union is a sin (Deut. 7:3-4; 1 Cor. 7:39; 2 Cor. 6:14-16)
- But what are you supposed to do when your unbelieving spouse wants to divorce you? This is the question that Paul raises in verse 15. Paul says that the brother or sister is not enslaved, and they ought to let their former spouse go. Now, the word for enslaved here is not the same word, but it is very similar to the word "bound," which Paul uses in 1 Corinthians 7:39.
  - [39] A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord.
- Based on this connection, I do think there are times when the Lord does allow divorce and remarriage, particularly in cases of sexual infidelity or abandonment. I would include physical abuse under the category of abandonment. And if there is anyone here suffering under these kinds of conditions, please talk to someone in the church today. Talk to me. We need to get you to safety.
- Having said this, I'm very reluctant to hold this. I think the damage of divorce is far more costly than we realize. On top of the consequences we have already discussed, fundamentally, divorce ruins the picture that Christ intended to paint for his church.
- Ephesians 5:32 talks about the fact that marriage is intended to display the good news of Christ's gospel. It's a sign to us of the infinite, long-suffering love of God!
- Romans 5:8 "but God demonstrated his love towards us in that while we were his enemies Christ died for us."
  - Friends, this blows my mind every time I think about it. Jesus knew how selfish I would be. Jesus knew how perverted my thoughts could be, Jesus knew how long it would take for me to grow, Jesus knew how hypocritical I would be, Jesus knew how angry I would be with him, Jesus knew how close I would come to apostasy, Jesus knew how much pain and suffering I would cause others around me, Jesus knew how sinful I could be better than I knew my own sinful heart.
  - Even knowing all of that, Jesus chose to give me the greatest gift he could ever give. Jesus chose to love me. Knowing all of that, Jesus came and died for me.
  - And even though I've been unfaithful to him time and time again, the gift of God's gospel tells me that if I go back to Jesus, he will take me back again!

- Friends, this is what marriage is supposed to display. It's the means whereby two people learn to love one another as unconditionally as Jesus loved them. It's meant to be the place where, when I mess up, I can go home and talk to Janice and be honest about what I did, and I can experience a small picture of God's love when she still loves me at my worst. That's the kind of gift marriage is.
- But it's a gift to people who are not in the best marriages as well. Even if you're single or in a less than ideal marriage, even if you're divorced or have a sketchy sexual past, steadfast holy marriages are a sign to you that Jesus loves you. That he knows you inside and out, and he still chooses to stay beside you. That he laid down his life for our sins so that we might live with him. That's why it's so important that the marriages within our church stay together. Pray for the marriages in our church!
- Even if you're not a Christian. Even if all of this sounds too silly to be true, isn't there a part of you that at least wants this to be true? That wants there to be someone out there who knows you inside and out and still loves you all the same? Who's committed to your good? Friends, the good news of Christ is that this person exists. And he's already given the ultimate gift of salvation for anyone who turns to him in faith. What are you gonna do with this great gift of God's grace?