**LET THE CHURCH, BE THE CHURCH**

**Singleness and Abstinence is NOT Next to Godliness**

1. TEXT 1 Corinthians 7:1–11 (ESV)

*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.*

1. ILLUSTRATION

There are any number of phrases not in the Bible. Verses like: "God helps those who help themselves." There is:

* Money is the root of all evil;
* To thine ownself be true;
* This too shall pass;
* Spare the rod, spoil the child (close but not quite ☺ ); and then there is the phrase “Cleanliness is next to godliness.” This was probably a Hebrew proverb that had been around for many centuries, but it first appeared in a printed sermon entitled “On Dress” by John Wesley in 1769. Wesley said, “Slovenliness is no part of religion…Cleanliness is indeed next to godliness.”

1. EXEGESIS

In Corinth, there arose another non-biblical verse in the Church: *singleness and abstinence are next to godliness.* Paul is addressing this very specific problem in Corinth that comes to him via a letter. We don’t know the whys and the wherefores’ but it certainly appears that there is notion floating around the Corinthian church that ***“singleness and abstinence” are next to godliness.*** “Some had the notion that because of all the sexual sin and marital confusion, it would be better to be single, even more spiritual to be celibate. This could lead some falsely pious people to advocate divorce in order to be single.” [[1]](#footnote-1) This false idea pervaded the early Church for centuries (and still does today in some so-called Christian organizations). For example:

*“John Chrysostom claims, ‘Virginity stands as far above marriage as the heavens stand above the earth.’ Jerome asserts, ‘All those who have not remained virgins, following the pattern of the pure chastity of angels and that of our Lord Jesus Christ himself, are polluted.’ Augustine maintains that marriage is not a good, but it is a good in comparison with fornication. Continence [abstinence], he says, is an ‘angelic exercise.’”[[2]](#footnote-2)*

Paul replies to this letter, not by giving a full treatment to the *theology of* marriage, but by applying biblical marriage truths to this idea of *unmarried & single is the right way to go.* There is the sense where Paul is saying: *I have said that I choose to be celibate and single. You interpret that to mean that I think marriage and sex are less than godly. Let me tell you what I really mean. I mean that:*

1. *Sexual relations should ONLY be between a man and his own wife; and a wife and her own husband.* Note verse 2: “*But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband.*”  *[Paul is clearly stating that a remedy to fight against the barrage of sexual temptation is a fulfilled monogamous relationship between husbands and wives.].*
2. *Secondly, he writes that sexual relations between married couples are not about the rights of one person versus the other.* Note verses 3 and 4: “*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.*” "The sentences emphasize two things: (1) that sexual relations are a “due” within marriage (v[[3]](#footnote-3). 3) because (2) the body is not one’s own free possession but fully belongs to one’s spouse."[[4]](#footnote-4)

It is important to remember the context. Paul is not advocating a demanding lifestyle. If a person believes that sexual intimacy reduces one's spiritual intimacy, Paul is saying, "No!" In addition "Paul’s emphasis . . . is not on “You owe me,” but on “I owe you.”[[5]](#footnote-5) " His assumption that each partner is under obligation to meet the other’s needs excludes spiritual unions and any unilateral attempt for a spouse to exert his or her own preference for celibacy. One cannot decide to indulge one’s own private, spiritual discipline and repudiate the rights of the one to whom one belongs."[[6]](#footnote-6)

1. Thirdly, we note that Paul affirms that *sexual abstinence should be by mutual consent, not manipulation or false ideas of spirituality.* We see that in verse 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.*” " Paul insists that any withdrawal may occur only after husband and wife arrive at a mutual decision. Wives are not subject to a husband’s vow. One spouse may not selfishly disregard the other’s physical needs, no matter how lofty the goal may be."[[7]](#footnote-7)
2. Paul's fourth point is critical to the argument. He says that *celibacy and marriage are gifts from God.* Look at verse 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.*” Therefore there is no spiritual merit if one chooses one over the other; neither can you make demands in the area of one over the other*.* (I'm going to discuss that further in a moment.)
3. Lastly, in view of some of these people suggesting that for the sake of hyper-spirituality Christians ought to abandon their marriages for a celibate life, Paul says plainly: *Christian wives and husbands should not 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.” (1 Corinthians 7:10–11, ESV)*. "The terms *separate* and *divorce* were not distinguished in Paul’s day as they are in many cultures today. To separate was to divorce. Jesus made fornication a legitimate grounds for divorce (Matt. 19:9). Paul argued that desertion was also grounds for divorce (7:15). With these exemptions in mind, Paul stated plainly that believers must not practice divorce."[[8]](#footnote-8) If they do divorce for some other reason, they are to remain unmarried.
4. SUMMARY

So, in summary, Paul “… says to the Corinthian church, ‘Listen, every man has his gift.  Most of you are married, stay married and fulfill the physical part of marriage . . . You that are single, if it’s single and without desire for fulfillment in marriage . . . then thank God for the beautiful gift that He’s given.’  So he lays the principle.  Celibacy is good.  Marriage is good.  It just depends on which God designs for you.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

1. MARITAL PRINCIPLES

It is based upon this passage that many of the biblical principles for marriage find their source. For those of us who are married, we should look carefully at them today. Here are the guiding principles that Paul affirms:

1. MARITAL MONOGAMY! There is an exclusivity in marriage that is often affirmed at the altar: "to be faithful to you alone as long as we both shall live." The battleground of all marriages, good or otherwise, is to live each day in the wonder that out of all the men or all the women, your husband or wife, is to be our primary and sole passion and delight. Notice that clear call to marital joy in the Bible: “*Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in the wife of your youth, a lovely deer, a graceful doe. Let her breasts fill you at all times with delight; be intoxicated always in her love.*” (Proverbs 5:18–19, ESV) “*Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that he has given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun.*” (Ecclesiastes 9:9, ESV)
2. MARITAL SURRENDER! The last thing our culture wants to hear about a good marriage is the idea of *surrender*. "'Marital ‘surrender’ means that one 'looks away from him/herself toward the other—entrusts him or herself to the other—in confidence that the other will not exploit this.' It is rooted in a desire to ‘belong’ to their partner.'” [[10]](#footnote-10) When a marriage starts off on the footing that says, "You ain't the boss of me" – both people lose. Again look at this marvelous picture in the Song of Solomon: “*My beloved is mine, and I am his; he grazes among the lilies.*” (Song of Solomon 2:16, ESV) “*I am my beloved’s and my beloved is mine; he grazes among the lilies.*” (Song of Solomon 6:3, ESV) “*I am my beloved’s, and his desire is for me.*” (Song of Solomon 7:10, ESV)

1. UNSELFISH MARITAL PROVISION! The third principle that Paul expresses is this idea of making it our goal to serve and provide for the needs of our spouses. As his wife suffered with Alzheimer's, the President of Columbia International University made an important decision. I want you to hear this for yourself: https://youtu.be/MqtG-XfxMC4

Did you hear what Dr. McQuilkin said, "If I took care of her for 40 years, I would never be out of her debt." That is a marriage built on *unselfish provision*.

1. MARITAL PERMANENCE! The fourth principle is permanence – *until death do us part*. I borrow a prayer from the Puritans when I conduct weddings. It was prayed for at Debra's and my wedding by our Pastor. The end of the prayer reads this way:

*May \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_and \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_never take each other’s love for granted but always experience that breathless wonder that exclaims ‘out of all this world, you have chosen me.’ When life is done and the sun is setting may they be found then as now, hand in hand still thanking God for each other. May they serve You happily, faithfully together until at last one shall lay the other into the arms of Jesus*

1. DIVINE MARITAL BLESSING! The last principle that I discern from this passage is the truth that your wife – your husband – is a gift. God's design that He imprinted in your spouse is by grace. It is a gift. As we will be reminded of, later in this epistle, the fact that one has received a gift is not to be a point of pride. I can't say sarcastically to my wife, "Debra, just remember I am God's gift to you!" All gifts are given with the purpose of bringing benefit to the Body of Christ. God has gifted with with a passion for marriage so I might serve my wife more faithfully.
2. FINAL PASTORAL WORD

Understanding marriage as a grace-gift has several implications[[11]](#footnote-11). Let me just close with one as an encouragement to those of you who are single and desire marriage. My remarks are directed though to the rest of us who are married. We who are married can sometimes unintentionally hurt those who are not. We constantly say,

* “Aren’t you married yet?”
* “What’s a nice girl like you doing unmarried?”
* “What you need is a good wife.”
* “Found anybody to date yet?”
* “It’s too bad he’s not married.”

If marriage and singleness are a gift, then we need to be careful about transmitting guilt, particularly to singles who want to marry. If they desire to be married and are not, they are already suffering. What they need is godly encouragement in the Lord. Probably the best thing we can do for the singles in our church who want to be married is to ask them, "How can I encourage you? How can I help? How can I be a brother or sister to you?"

1. MacArthur, J., Jr. (Ed.). (1997). *The MacArthur Study Bible* (electronic ed., p. 1737). Nashville, TN: Word Pub. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Garland, D. E. (2003). *1 Corinthians* (pp. 257–258). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. v. verse (verses) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Fee, G. D. (2014). *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*. (N. B. Stonehouse, F. F. Bruce, G. D. Fee, & J. B. Green, Eds.) (Revised Edition., p. 310). Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Fee, G. D. (2014). *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*. (N. B. Stonehouse, F. F. Bruce, G. D. Fee, & J. B. Green, Eds.) (Revised Edition., p. 310). Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Garland, D. E. (2003). *1 Corinthians* (p. 258). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Garland, D. E. (2003). *1 Corinthians* (p. 261). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Pratt, R. L., Jr. (2000). *I & II Corinthians* (Vol. 7, p. 115). Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. https://www.gtycanada.org/resources/sermons/1828/to-marry-or-not-to-marry [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Garland, D. E. (2003). *1 Corinthians* (p. 260). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Garland, D. E. (2003). *1 Corinthians* (p. 272). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)