

Counsel on Marriage, part 1: Celibacy or marriage?

(1 Corinthians 7:1-9)

Ch. 7 is devoted to the topic of marriage and begins the response of Paul to specific questions from the Corinthian believers. Although we do not have those questions, we might guess at the first one. "Is it healthy to go without sex? Shouldn't people get married so that they can have sex properly?" Pressures upon the Corinthian believers included excessive sexual immorality on the one hand and ascetic down-playing of marriage and sexual relations on the other. (Cf. 1 Tim. 4:1-3; Heb. 13:4.) It is a battle to maintain a proper Biblical position. Marriage and sex in marriage are good and pure. Sex outside of marriage is wrong. Paul begins with general principles on celibacy, i.e., singleness and the abstinence from sexual relations, and includes principles about sexual relations in marriage, before addressing specific groups.

I. Three principles for celibacy versus marriage (7:1-2, 6-7)

1. *Celibacy is okay (7:1).*

The idiomatic phrase, "it is good for a man not to marry" (NIV), more likely means that it is okay for a person not to have sexual relations. His careful choice of man (= person) rather than man (= male, husband) implies that he is not condoning celibacy within marriage, but rather an abstinence from sex due to not being married.

2. *Celibacy is not advisable when sexual temptation is strong (7:2).*

In Corinth sexual immorality with the temptations was extreme. The sexual drive is not wrong but it has a proper context for fulfilment, i.e., marriage. Celibacy is okay, but when someone senses strong sexual temptation, it is not a wise course to pursue. Marriage, if possible, is much better.

3. *Celibacy is a gift of God; marriage is not commanded though a normal provision of God (7:6-7).*

Paul does not command marriage or celibacy. Celibacy is good but marriage, too, is good and proper. Paul does see advantages to his own celibacy (cf. 7:26, 28, 32ff) and wishes that others could take advantage of them as well. He is neither anti-woman (he refers to people, not "males") nor anti-marriage (cf. 1 Tim 5:14; Eph 5:22-33; 1 Cor 11). Living celibate is a gift of God. God's grace to us reveals itself in different manners. To live unmarried requires special grace of God (cf. Matt 19:9-12). To get married is normal, but God's provision in marriage is also a gift (cf. Pr 18:22; 19:14).

→ Those who don't feel "gifted" should remember that God provides all that we need to live righteously (cf. 1 Co 10:13) and it pleases God to trust in Him. Those seeking direction should remember that God's instructions and not opportunity defines what is right. Consider consequences and the responsibilities that come. Marriage is God's created "norm" and an acceptable response to sexual temptation.

II. Four principles for sexual relations in marriage (7:2-5)

1. *Fidelity: Marriage is a monogamous relationship of mutual fidelity (7:2).*

2. *Liability: Marriage obligates a person to give sexually to the spouse (7:3).*

"Should fulfil his marital duty" is literally "let him keep paying his debt", a euphemism for carrying on sexual responsibilities in marriage. Sex is owed to the spouse. But the emphasis is on giving and not on receiving. It is not a license to demand whatever you want from the other, but a command to give to the other that which they need and is rightfully theirs.

3. *Authority: Marriage gives authority over one's body to the spouse (7:4).*

"The two will become one flesh" through sexual intercourse (cf. 6:16; Gen 2:24, Mt 19:5, Eph 5:31). Husband and wife now share responsibility and authority for both bodies which have become united.

4. *Priority: Marriage removes even prayer as a reason to forego sexual relations unless the pause is brief and by mutual consent (7:5).*

The thrust of v. 5 is in the main clause, "do not deprive each other." Lit., do not steal or defraud. Failing to pay the debt of sexual relations is stealing from the spouse. The one exception of gaining time and focus for prayer by abstaining from sexual relations requires that both agree and that it be for a limited amount of time. Contrary to much of our pious thinking, marital sex is more important than prayer, if abstinence defrauds the spouse and sets them up for Satanic temptation.

III. Application No. 1: the unmarried and widows (7:8-9)

Paul makes an application of these principles to the first group he addresses in verses 8-9.

1. Although "unmarried" could refer to widowers, it is more probable that the general sense is meant, i.e., those not bound in marriage, though not without exception (cf. v. 11). Widows are given special mention probably because of their vulnerability, special problems and temptations.

2. Paul's advice summarizes the principles he has just developed: Celibacy is okay, but sexual passions, if they are not controllable, would advise that they get married.

Paul addressed a specific question in a specific context. There is further teaching on marriage elsewhere in the Bible. Sex is not the only reason for marriage. It is not the primary activity of marriage. However, it is important within marriage and especially for a Christian couple in a sex-crazed world. Contrary to culture we are called to be faithful to our spouses – physically and mentally. Contrary to some false teaching among Christians the sexual relation is an obligation in marriage.

God has given a very beautiful, enjoyable and significant gift in the sexual relation of a man and woman. He has wrapped it in the protective package of marriage where it is to be kept and enjoyed. May God grant us a proper and balanced understanding in a world gone crazy.