

## Sex, Marriage, & Singleness

1 Corinthians 7:1-7 | Jonathan K. Dodson | September 14, 2014

We're walking through 1 Corinthians so that we can better learn how to be saints together, a community set apart, close to God. This morning we'll see how "saints together" moves away from negative issues associated with sex into a more positive vision of sex, singleness, and marriage. This vision could be healing, liberating, instructive for all of us *if we'll open ourselves up to it*.

### Cultural Views of Sex

Paul picks up the theme of "glorifying God with your body" from chapter six by turning his attention to specific matters raised by the Corinthians: "[Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman" \(7:1\)](#). How do we get a positive vision of sex from this? When he says it's good for a man *not* to have sexual relations with a woman? Well, Paul *isn't* stating *his* view but a view in the culture the Corinthians had questions about. Variations of this saying appear through the literature of the time. What does it mean? It depends on how the word behind "sexual relations" is interpreted. It literally means "to touch," which is used in Greek literature as a euphemism for sex. "If you lay one hand on her I'll kill you." So one view in Corinth could be that it wasn't good to have sex, period. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century women were told it was dirty, painful, and to be endured for the Queen. When my son saw me working on this sermon, he read the title and said, "Dad, isn't sex bad? Why are you talking about sex?" There's this restrictive view that sees sex as bad or dirty. The Stoics viewed sex as utilitarian, meant purely for reproduction, not to be enjoyed: "it is good for a man not to have sex with a woman *for the sake of pleasure*." I have friends who were exposed to porn as little boys and, as a result, sex became dirty, affecting their experience in marriage. A good thing used in a bad way, *way before its time*. This distorts sex. Some women feel the same way; sex is something they want to avoid. This may be due to a misuse of sex that hurt. When my son came into my office, asking me if sex is bad, I said to him "Sex is a gift from God; it is good, not bad. But people take this good thing and use it in bad ways outside of a marriage. Then I asked him, "Is a hammer bad?" No, its used to build homes. But if you take a hammer and use it to hit someone's head that's bad, right? The point is that we can take good things and misuse them. People do that with sex. Maybe that's happened to you, sex has been misused in your life and hurt you? As a single, maybe you're afraid of sex or maybe as a married you just enduring it. **The restrictive view makes too little of sex, distorts it making it evil.** On the other hand, we saw in chapter six a **permissive view** that strips away guidelines leading to all kinds of damage, "I'm free to do all things." This person sees sex as an end in itself charged with dominating lust. Austin songwriter David Ramirez, sings: "[I forgot what it's like to hold a woman's hand and not lead her straight to my bed, I've been loyal to the wants of my lustful heart. And unfaithful to my friend Love.](#)" The permissive view is unfaithful to love. Treated like an appetite, it must be fed, reducing others to sexual food, confusing **alluring, dominating lust for love**. Some of you can't see a woman or man without sexualizing them. This is really hard to escape because sex is misused everywhere. When I was talking to my son, he said, "Sex is bad like when they say a car is sexy on T.V." I said, yes, it's a misuse of sex. Sex should not be a marketing tool, used to sell. It should be a

gift used for intimacy, to unite husband and wife. Unbridled desire can harm. I know of a huge athletic guy who had been waiting to have sex until he was married. He built up all his expectation, desire, and on wedding night intimidated his poor wife, hurting her deeply. It took time to undo that. **The permissive view makes too much of sex.** See we can make too much or too little of it, by treating it as an appetite or as an evil. What's the proper view? How can we recover a positive vision that restores the beauty and goodness of sex?

### **Mutuality in Marriage**

Paul's solution is radical, mutual, marital sex. See 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.”](#) **Radical.** When he says, “because of sexual immorality you can marry”, he isn't saying marriage as a fix for lust. Any married man can tell you that. Instead, he's probably responding to the anti-sexual pleasure position in Corinth, saying, go ahead and have sexual pleasure *in line with the kingdom, with your wife or husband.* Now, the reason this is radical is that in Greek and Roman culture women were seen as inferior, as property of men. But Paul radicalizes this view by insisting on equal rights for wives and husbands in sex. The husband should submit to her desires and the wife to his desires. They have authority over one another's body. This mutuality comes right out of the creation account, where we discover that *both* man and woman are made in the image of God, not just man. God makes Adam, then Eve, giving them distinct roles but total equality. There they are, in the garden, naked and unashamed. And he says, “Be fruitful and multiply!” God came up with, and blessed sex, for the good of both genders. This should redeem the restrictive views. God invented pleasurable sex, set up two naked people, and told them go fill the earth! It isn't bad or dirty. It's good and glorifying to God, when it's in line with the kingdom. How do you know its in line? Notice sex is **mutual**. Husbands and wives are to share their bodies, their authority, their pleasure. Sex is meant to be mutual, not one-sided. It is total dedication to one another. That's why it's so hard to breakup with someone you've slept with outside of marriage. We're made to be one. Tim Keller comments: [“Indeed, sex is perhaps the most powerful God-created way to help you give your entire self to another human being. Sex is God's appointed way for two people to reciprocally say to one another, “I belong completely, permanently, and exclusively to you.” You must not use sex to say anything less.”](#) **Its design is to create permanence through mutual self-giving, and in it we are meant to see a microcosm of God's love,** where he gives himself to us fully in his Son and Spirit, while also inviting us into himself. This love enriches a marriage. Can you see how this positive vision trumps sex as an appetite or an evil? Do you know why the permissive view doesn't work? It's not mutual. It's **individualistic. It places the sex drive, desires, wants above the spouse, the marriage, the community.** Its aim is entirely pleasing self, whatever the cost. It comes out in justifying porn or self-pleasure, “Since I can't get my desires met right now, I have a right to fulfill it on my own.” You can be committed to marital sex and still get it wrong by making sex something that purely serves you—frequency, quality, all revolve around you. Individualism divorces sex from the covenant community in marriage, submits to lustful urges at the cost of others. Porn, self-

pleasuring, sexual dominance, and deviance force individual sexual desire on others. Our city thinks, "That's backwards." No, it's not backwards its *selfish*. It reduces sex to mere self-satisfaction, almost animalistic urges that must be fulfilled. That's Darwinistic, selfish not mutual. The Bible gives us a vision of mutuality that considers the spouse, the family, the community that restrains and reorders sexual impulses to reflect the kingdom of God. In verse 5, he is willing to concede the Corinthian practice of temporary sexual abstinence to spend more time in prayer. This sounds strange to us, but we aren't used to denying our physical appetites to enlarge our spiritual ones. See Paul knows that only God truly satisfies, that the joy of sex and permanent commitment, are a window into communion with God, where true lasting pleasure is found. *The good news is that you can tell God you've made too much or too little of sex, an appetite or an evil, and he wont abandon you for cheating on him. He's totally committed to you, and wants to give you deeper joy, and greater vision of sex.* He's ready to forgive, and redeem. Now, as you reflect on this, many of you will need to talk this out with your spouse, if you're married, or a friend if you're not. Married, ask them how you can grow in mutuality. Single, ask others how they are stewarding their sexuality in line with the kingdom. We all need help in turning away from individualistic views to step into a more vibrant, biblical practice.

### Gospel View

In verses 6-7 Paul expands on this positive vision of sex: "[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 and one of another.](#)" Here he holds up celibacy as a possible calling from God. Singleness isn't bad. Married people don't need to try to marry everyone. Paul's personal but not inspired view is that everyone would be celibate like him. Why? Later on, he makes the point that marriage complicates things, husband and wives become preoccupied with marital life, family life, and have less time to devote to single-minded kingdom work (7:35). It's true. Life gets much more complicated. I used to go whenever and wherever I wanted. If I wanted to see a movie, take a mission trip I did, but now I'm responsible for four other people. I used to buy what I wanted. Now I restrict purchases, and focus them on my family. Marriage requires mutuality in time and finances and communication. Some need to start here. *So single people need to know that marriage isn't as great as you think, but married people also need to be reminded that singlehood isn't great as we think.* It can be lonely, lacking fulfillment. Only God truly satisfies, but God also gives a community to singles. When's the last time you had a single over for dinner? Showed interest in their lives? Sexual purity requires work, communication, community, mutuality. It's possible to have an active sex life, and a diminished relationship. It's also possible to have an active friendship but diminished sex life. A good marriage is a whole endeavor. We all need to grow over time. How do we do it? We recognize the **gift** we have from God, there is one of one kind and one of another. What's the gift? This is misinterpreted to refer to "the gift of singleness" or marriage, but when Paul talks about gifts, as he does extensively in chps 12-14, these gifts are the result of kingdom citizenship. They accompany our new creation status as gifts from the Holy Spirit and don't exist prior to becoming saints together. What gift is he referring to then? The gifts in view are **contentedness** in the calling. Thistleton: "[It is not celibacy versus marriage, but the gift of a positive attitude which makes the most of the freedoms of celibacy without frustration, and the positive](#)

attitude which caringly provides the responsibilities, intimacies, love, and 'dues' of marriage while equally living out the gospel." **In other words, the gift of trusting in God for contentment actually frees us to use singleness and marriage to live out the gospel.** How? The single who consistently pursues God and his work, with greater time and devotion, experiences an intimacy that sustains him or her for a lifetime. The gift of contentment in Christ frees you to not complain, demand or become depressed about your marital status. *Single people, marriage isn't as great as you think. Married people singleness isn't as great as you think.* If I just had more free time, could get away, then I'd be content. What he's saying is: God is your contentment. *He's greater, deeper, more satisfying than we can imagine.*