

TOO HOT TO HANDLE

8 To Marry Or To Burn?

Scripture Reading

1 Corinthians 7:1 – 9

Confusion At Corinth

Although it was still a young church, the church at Corinth was in danger of running off the rails. The congregation was divided into factions, each competing with the other, each claiming a different allegiance and each thinking it was better than the rest. On top of that there was some serious sin going on and nobody was doing anything about it. Some of the believers were suing others in the fellowship in the public courts and some were abusing their Christian freedom, making it an excuse to do whatever they pleased.

In the first part of his letter Paul has had some pretty strong things to say about these issues. In chapter 7 he moves on to answer some questions that have been sent to him from Corinth.

Now Concerning The Things You Wrote...

Apparently the church had questions about marriage, divorce and remarriage, about the kind of food a Christian should or should not eat, about conduct in worship and about the use of spiritual gifts: all of them issues which still have potential to cause controversy in churches.

Over the next few weeks we are going to look at how Paul answered their questions. Chapter 7 deals with matters of marriage, divorce and remarriage and that is where we will begin.

Keep Clear Of Women?

“It is good for a man not to touch a woman.”

1 Corinthians 7:1

That is how most translations put it, but the NIV says, “It is good for a man not to marry” and that is how most understand it. In the remainder of the section Paul teaches:

- In the face of all the sexual pressures around us Christians should get married (verse 2).
- For the same reason every married couple should have a good, active sexual relationship (verse 3).
- A wife’s body belongs to her husband and a husband’s body belongs to his wife. Each has a duty to please the other (verse 4).
- Abstinence from sexual relations by a married couple is to be avoided unless they agree to do so for a short time so that they can give themselves more fully to prayer and fasting and so that they do not give Satan an opportunity to tempt them because of their lack of self control (verse 5).

So it appears that Paul is saying, it is better to be single but if you cannot control yourself then get married if you have to. The implication of this is that the purpose of marriage is to provide a way to satisfy urges which cannot otherwise be controlled.

But hold on, is this not the Paul who said,

“Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron, forbidding to marry...”

1 Timothy 4:3

Is this not the Paul who elsewhere places so much importance on marriage and even says that to qualify for the job an elder must be an exemplary husband (1 Timothy 3:2)? And didn’t God say, “It is not good for a man to be alone.” (Genesis 2:18)? I don’t know about you but I am not happy with our first superficial look at this passage for it seems to jar with so much of what I read elsewhere in the Bible.

How Do You Explain It?

Although there are those who would use this passage to justify their view that for a Christian, and especially for someone actively involved in the Lord's work the celibate state is preferable, most recognise that this view is inconsistent with the teaching of many other passages. So how is the apparent discrepancy resolved?

First, assuming as we do that all Scripture is inspired by God, we know that no passage of Scripture will ever contradict another: if it appears to then we have got it wrong. This is an important principle to apply when you study the Bible: every part must be seen in the light of the rest. So, whatever conclusion we come to must fit not only with what we read in 1 Corinthians but also with everything we read in the rest of the Bible.

Here are the views that are commonly put forward.

Hard Times Call For Tough Measures

It could be that the church at Corinth was facing circumstances which, for that present time, meant it would be better not to get married. Verse 26 supports that idea.

"I suppose therefore that this is good because of the present distress—that it is good for a man to remain as he is."

1 Corinthians 7:26

It may have been a time of severe persecution or, and there is historical evidence to support this, it may have been a time of famine. In those circumstances it would have been difficult for a young couple to set up home and for a man to support a new wife. The famine idea also gives a reason for the urgency behind the Corinthian question about eating food offered to idols which Paul takes up in chapter 8.

So, there are circumstances in which it is better not to get married but we live in a world where the pressures are strong and the temptation to sexual sin is great and if that is a problem then you should get married anyway and when you do you should have a good healthy sex life in case Satan should tempt you to be unfaithful.

But there is still a problem, I think, if we understand Paul to be saying in verse 7, "I wish that everybody could be single like me but that is a gift and not everyone has it." For then he is still saying, "Single is best and marriage is for people who cannot control themselves."

It's Not About Marriage!

An alternative view is that this passage is not about marriage so much as it is about self control in a world where sexual immorality is coming at you from every direction, as it was in Corinth and as it does today. Paul's purpose was not to keep people from marriage but to keep them from sin.

The word in verse 1 that is translated "marry" in the NIV is a synonym for sexual intercourse. Just like us, I suppose, Paul was a bit bashful about coming straight out and saying, "It is good for a man not to have intercourse with a woman." So he said "It is good for a man not to touch a woman," where we might have said, "It is good for a man not to sleep with a woman."

So the gist of the passage becomes: it is good for the men not to enter into any sexual relationship but instead each man and each woman should get married and satisfy his or her desires within marriage and if you cannot control yourself you can deal with it by enjoying a healthy sex life at home with your own husband or wife.

And Paul's comment in verse 7? Well that could be, "I wish that everyone was able to control himself in the way I can but that is a gift which not everyone has."

It seems to me that this understanding fits the context in 1 Corinthians — remember Paul was addressing the problem of immorality immediately before this in chapter 6 — and it is consistent with the rest of Scripture.

Only Quoting The Question

Yet another view that has been put forward is that the second part of verse one is merely quoting back a statement that the Corinthians have put to Paul for comment, and that the remainder of the chapter is a refutation of it. Paul is systematically taking all the possible scenarios that could come up when you advocate celibacy and showing why, in each situation, marriage is best.

That's The Answer — Now What Was The Question?

It all depends what the question was that Paul was answering. If the question was, "There are people who are teaching that every believer should remain single so that he can devote himself more fully to God's service, what do you think?" Then the view of those who argue for celibacy is correct.

If the question was, "Paul, the young people are getting married and the young men cannot support their wives because of this famine, would it be better for them to stay single?" then the "hard times" view is better.

But if the question the Corinthians asked of Paul was, "How should we instruct these young lads in the church who are hanging out with prostitutes every night of the week? They say they have to because they cannot control themselves. Is that right?" then the third view we have considered fits well.

If only we knew what the question was. What do you think?

And By The Way...

Before we leave this passage there is one other difficulty in interpreting it that I want to mention. It comes in verses 3 to 6.

"Let the husband render to his wife the affection due her, and likewise also the wife to her husband. The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. And likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. Do not deprive one another except with consent for a time, that you may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again so that Satan does not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. But I say this as a concession, not as a commandment."

1 Corinthians 7:3 – 6

There are those who take these verses to be saying that a wife (it is usually this way around) has a duty to fulfil all the sexual desires of her husband. If she does not she is failing in her duty and, some would add, if he, as a result, strays and sins it is her fault.

What is the problem with that view? Well, there is more than one.

First it runs contrary to a biblical understanding of the purpose of the physical relationship within marriage. My understanding is that intercourse is not primarily designed as a way of burning up hormones. That lowers it to the level of an animal act. No, sexual intercourse is the highest expression of the love between a man and a woman.

Second, every husband is taught to love his wife with the kind of self-sacrificing love that would deny himself anything for the sake of her happiness and well-being (see for example Ephesians 5:25 – 33 and 1 Peter 3:7). That is hardly consistent with expecting her to be alluring and passionate when she is tired or has a headache.

Again the principle must be applied: however we understand the words of Paul here they cannot teach anything that contradicts other parts of God's Word. So what is Paul saying?

- He is clearly saying that the sexual relationship is an important part of marriage and not to be set aside.
- He is saying that having entered into marriage neither partner may opt out of or call an end to sexual relations.
- In fact, with the possible exception of times of prayer and fasting (and even that is a concession), he is saying that nothing justifies one partner ending the sexual relationship within the marriage.

But Paul also implies that initiation and control over sexual relations lies equally with both partners and we have to add that the way all of this is worked out in practice must be consistent with a thoroughly biblical understanding of sexuality and marriage and in particular the two points of difficulty mentioned above must be taken into account.

Next Week

1 Corinthians 7:10 – 16