

## 1 Corinthians 7:1-9

### Introduction

I think that one of the big misconceptions about Christianity and the Bible is that it is pretty down on sex. Don't do it. Don't have it. Don't talk about it.

Growing up, most kids in my school assumed Christians were basically all like Ned Flanders from the Simpson. Ned is the neighbour of the Simpson Family and is depicted as an overly-friendly and entirely prudish church-going man. Ned is so prudish that he can't even *say* the word sex out loud even when there are no children in sight. Instead, he has to spell the word out. This may be changing, but I suspect, many Aussies still assume Christians think of sex like Ned Flanders – something negative, icky and embarrassing.

What is striking about this passage before us, is just how *unashamed, unembarrassed* God's word is to speak about sex as a *good* thing. The apostle Paul does not sheepishly spell out the word s-e-x to the Corinthians. He is calls them to see how good and helpful sex is within its proper context of marriage.

And we need to hear Paul's words tonight, because I actually think we can be more like Ned Flanders than we'd like to admit. I think for many of us, there is a reluctance, even embarrassment to talk about sex because we find the topic somewhat awkward. Even married couples can find talking about this aspect of their marriage difficult and cringy. But God wants us (married and unmarried) to spend some time thinking biblically about sex. He want us to see why it is such a good and necessary thing to keep alive and well within marriage. If we fail to engage with God on the topic of sex, we do ourselves a disservice.

So, in order to do justice to this text, I want to spend some time thinking about the context and the big misconception about sex that had developed in Corinth. Then I want to spend the bulk of our time looking at Paul's corrective about sex within marriage and finally conclude by looking at his counsel to the unmarried.

### **1. The Big Misconception (Sex is to be avoided in marriage).**

So, first, Paul addresses the big *misconception* about sex in Corinth. Some were making the claim that sex within marriage was to be avoided.

You see it there in verse 1:

*7 Now for the matters you wrote about: "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman."*

Some think that this phrase in verse 1 is Paul declaring his own opinion. But I think it's better to understand this verse as Paul *quoting* what some in the church are saying – hence I agree with the quotation marks placed in many of your bibles. As in chapter 6:12, Paul is taking a popularised misconception, and critiquing it - holding it up against the light of God's truth and the gospel.

“So, you guys say “It’s good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman... Let’s think about that for a minute.”

But what's the actual issue with this view? Where's the controversy? Hasn't Paul just been calling the church to holiness in the previous two chapters. Hasn't Paul just been telling them to avoid all kinds of sexual immorality? Isn't this quote kind of suggesting the same principle?

Well, no actually. You see those in the celibacy camp weren't just applying it to illicit sex outside of marriage (adultery) – which would be correct. They were applying it to sex *within* marriage! We know this, because Paul directs all his following comments to married couples encouraging them *not* to apply such a principle in their marriages.

Just imagine that view point was getting taught by some here at church. Imagine going to one of our marriage tune up courses with your spouse (or if your single a hypothetical spouse) and hearing one of the pastors say in the first session – “alright guys, one of the best things you can do as a Christian married couple is to stop having sex.” Do you think that's a message you'd instinctively want to buy into? I suspect that for many married couples that teaching would be about as welcome as flies at a bbq.

So why was it that some in the Corinthian church had bought into the idea that celibacy in marriage was a *good* thing? I mean some must have taken this position or Paul wouldn't have felt the need to address it,

Well, there have been a few different explanations on this, but the one that I feel is most compelling is that abstinence in marriage may have been considered a mark of true spiritual zeal. We know the Corinthians struggled with pride - the desire to look wise, strong and spiritual. Abstinence in marriage may have been one way to prove your *true* devotion to God.

There have been other examples in Church-history where people have taken good gifts of God like food, or friendship, or good health, and rejected them in the name of spiritual zeal. Some early believers chose to live their lives in the harsh elements of the desert, some ate only grass and some chose to live in solitary confinement for much of their life. One man, Simeon the Stylite was a 5<sup>th</sup> Century Christian who chose to live for 37 years on a small platform on the top of a pillar. The name for this particular way of living is asceticism.

But Paul says 1 Timothy 4 that in its worst form, such a view point is a form of demonic teaching.

*<sup>3</sup> They forbid marriage and demand abstinence from foods that God created to be received with gratitude by those who believe and know the truth. <sup>4</sup> For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving*

In its worst forms asceticism (the unwarranted rejection of God's good gifts) is harmful to the person involved, and a denial of the gospel which says that Christ's achievements (not our achievements) justify us. His costly sacrifice, not our acts of sacrifice.

So what effect was this "no sex in marriage" ascetic view point having in the church? Well, Paul's words will show us that it was having two major effects: (1) was that it was exposing those who had signed up to it to greater temptation to sexual immorality. (2) was that it was putting unloving demands on the other spouse in the marriage who was just expected to "go along" with the decision.

This view was not simply wrong. It was dangerous and unloving.

Why do I go on about all this context? Because it's important for us to understand *what* Paul is responding to when he talks about sex in these verses. Too often I've seen these verses plucked out of their context and pointed to as though they were a neat summary of everything the bible has to say about sex. But these verses are not all the bible has to say about the good gift of sex. They are primarily a defence of the proper and right place of sexual intimacy within the context of marriage.

So with all that in mind, we are better placed to hear and understand what Paul says about sex in the following verses. So let's look at his big corrective to the misconception that it is good to be celibate in marriage.

## **2. Paul's big Corrective – (Sex is to be embraced in marriage).**

There are two big reasons Paul gives in the defence of sex within marriage. One is that it is a help in the fight for holiness. Two is that it is part of a mutual duty to love one another.

### *1. Sex in marriage is a help in the fight for holiness.*

First, healthy sexual intimacy in marriage is a help in the fight for holiness.

When most people think of activities to help them fight against sin and promote holiness in their lives, I suspect most people think, keep up your bible reading, keep up your prayer life,

keep up your church attendance. I'm not sure many married couples automatically think "keep up your sex-life." But that is what Paul says here. Healthy sexual intimacy in marriage *is* a help in the fight for holiness in the face of sexual immorality.

Now, I say "healthy sexual intimacy" because there is an *unhealthy* approach to sex in marriage that can actually be sinful and damaging to holiness.

One spouse forcing or manipulating the other into sex is not helping holiness but hindering it – through a selfish, unloving attitude. The use of pornographic and erotic material within the act of sex is not helping holiness but hindering it. As I'll highlight soon, the sex spoken of in this passage is always to be understood against the backdrop of Paul's other words to husbands and wives in the NT. The Christian idea of sex in marriage is based on the foundation of love and service that we have come to know for ourselves in the gospel.

With that in mind, I return to the first reason Paul offers – Sex in marriage is a help in the fight for holiness. And you see him make that point in verse 2:

*<sup>2</sup> But because sexual immorality is so common,<sup>[a]</sup> each man should have sexual relations with his own wife, and each woman should have sexual relations with her own husband.*

You can imagine what the advocates of celibacy in marriage would have been saying: "Our approach is the more spiritual one, the holier position to take." Paul is saying the opposite – if married couples want to take holiness seriously in a world saturated with sexual immorality and temptation, *don't* be celibate – but make sex a priority in your marriage. Notice he doesn't say each man/woman "can" have sexual relationship, but "*should*"... There is a necessity about this.

Every believer is called to holiness in the face of sexual immorality (we heard that in chapters 5 and 6). Every believer is called to grow in self-control in the face of sexual temptation. Paul here is simply giving one practical way to *married* couples that will help them in this pursuit. He calls them to channel their sexual desires (which are a powerful force and can easily go astray) into the proper place of each other.

This isn't a new teaching in the Bible. The wisdom of proverbs likewise calls married couples to find sexual satisfaction in each other rather than anyone outside of the marriage.

*18 Let your fountain be blessed,  
and take pleasure in the wife of your youth.*

*19 A loving deer, a graceful doe<sup>[d]</sup>—  
let her breasts always satisfy you;  
be lost in her love forever.*

*20 Why, my son, would you lose yourself  
with a forbidden woman  
or embrace a wayward woman?*

*21 For a man's ways are before the LORD's eyes,  
and he considers all his paths.*

Find satisfaction in the arms of your spouse says the author of proverbs. Paul says the same thing again in the second half of verse 5 where he calls married couples not to have frequent extended periods of abstinence.

*..come together again; otherwise, Satan may tempt you because of your lack of self-control.*

“Satan may tempt you.” Those words remind us of the seriousness of sexual temptation and the need to take it seriously. Our fight for holiness in our marriages is a spiritual battle against a formidable enemy. John Piper rightly says that:

*“When you battle with sexual temptation, you battle against Satan. Not because he creates the desire, but because he so powerfully and deceptively uses the desire.”*

The battle for holiness is a war against Satan – and Christian married couples would be wise to listen to God’s counsel here. He is calling you to take his counsel seriously and make healthy sexual intimacy a priority in your marriage.

Application:

Now, there are a couple of points of application that I want to touch on at this point.

*Help not a cure*

The first is to make sure that you know what Paul is and isn’t saying here. He is saying sexual intimacy in marriage is a *help*, he is not saying it is a cure. If it was a cure, Jesus himself wouldn’t have had to give such strong statements to people in his day (many of whom would have been in sexually active marriages) about the sin of committing adultery (Luke 18:20).



The gift of sex in marriage *is* a good help in fighting against sexual immorality (God's word tell us that here) but it is *not* a cure. Sadly there are a number of devastated and broken spouses that can testify to that truth. Which hopefully reminds those of you who are married that cultivating self-control is not simply an "singles" issue. You too must continue to ask God to grow that fruit of the Spirit in you too (Gal 5:22-23). But I'm going to return to this point later.

Now, in most marriages there will be a difference in sexual desire and temptation and so there may be a different felt need for sexual intimacy to help in this way.. How does one spouse go about raising this with the other? This is the second part of the application.

*Communicate, don't manipulate.*

Communicate, don't manipulate. You see, there is a way you could abuse this text to manipulate your spouse. You could say: "If you don't start having more sex with me, there's every chance I'm simply going to start looking at porn again. Do you want that to happen!?"

But do you see how that's manipulating? The way it's framed makes the other person (often the wife) feel totally responsibly for their spouse's godliness. Jonathan Parnell (US pastor and writer) calls this "ultimatum intimacy or blackmail love." "If I don't please my husband sexually, he will have an affair." That kind of approach is manipulating and unloving.

Healthy communication, however, doesn't seek to place the burden on the other person. It simply raises the issue and invites discussion about a way forward making sure the other person's needs are also considered.

Healthy communication will be honest about any desire for more sexual intimacy in the marriage. But it will also give space to discuss the health of the marriage generally. It will seek to figure out whether or not there is enough of a loving culture within the marriage that your spouse actually desires to have sex? Are you talking well, showing kindness, being patient, helping with housework? These things matter.

Communicate don't manipulate.

So we've looked at the first big reason Paul gives for married couples to pursue sexual intimacy – it is a help in the fight for holiness. But second it is a duty of love to one's spouse.

## *2. A Duty of love.*

I don't know about you, but my favourite part of any wedding, is the vows the husband and wife make to each other during the ceremony. As a minister who marries people, I sometimes have the privilege of getting an up close experience of this. I love hearing them make that huge promise to love and cherish one another until death do they part. But that sums up the marriage commitment doesn't it.. A life-long commitment to love the person you have entered into covenant with. When you marry someone, you take on a new duty in life – a duty to love (that is to do good to) the one you are married to. Paul is saying in this passage that sexual intimacy is one way a husband and wife fulfill their marital duty to love their spouse. To deprive one another of this gift, was in many ways an act of neglect – of lovelessness.

But this is what was happening in Corinthian church.

You can imagine the scene right, a husband comes home one Sunday afternoon. Walks into the kitchen and says to his wife: “Honey, I’ve just come back from a really interesting meeting with a few other guys from church. These guys seem really spiritual. One of them was saying that the way to show your devotion to God is by avoiding sexual relations... So, I was thinking that from on I’m going to cut that part of our marriage off.” How do you think the wife might feel about that? Imagine if your spouse came and said that to you!

“Um... okay... I’m not sure about this. I kind of liked that aspect of our marriage.”

“Sorry, honey, it’s for God.”

Whether it was the husband or the wife saying this... Paul’s response is “no.” “Don’t make the mistake of thinking this is some super-spiritual duty before God.. Your duty before God in this department, is to love your wife, your husband. Verse 3:

*<sup>3</sup> The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband.*

*<sup>4</sup> A wife does not have the right over her own body, but her husband does. In the same way, a husband does not have the right over his own body, but his wife does. <sup>5</sup> Do not deprive one another...*

Now, these words can seem pretty confronting to a world that is increasingly sceptical of any talk about not having rights over one’s own body. The #MeToo movement has been a loud voice against sexual misconduct against women and advocating strongly for consent. And that’s why we need to understand what Paul is saying here. And see how it is good, not bad.

Paul's words do not suggest a husband or a wife has total authority over the body of their spouse. He is not giving a spouse authority to demand sex without consent or to demand sexual acts that are sinful, painful, or demeaning. He is not saying that spouse has an obligation to give in to such demands.

What he is doing is simply highlighting the radical one-flesh nature of marriage (the complete giving of one's self to the other, for the good of the other). He is correcting those who believe sex in marriage should stop and were thus were neglecting to love their spouse sexually.

To go back to the scenario – when the husband walks into the kitchen and makes the decision to pull the pin on sex – he's in some sense stealing from his wife because they are one flesh (6:16) and his body no longer belongs to him alone but also to her.

Healthy sexual intimacy in marriage gives pleasure to a spouse, it creates a sense of connectedness, it builds each person up. Romans 13:8 speaks of us have an ongoing duty to love one another. In marriage, sex is a wonderful means by which husbands and wives fulfill their vows to love one another.

### Application

Paul's words in verse 3 remind us that the Christian approach towards sex in marriage should be other-person centred. This is why Paul speaks in terms of a "duty" to the other.

The Christian (in all areas of life, including sex in marriage) is governed by the Lord Jesus – The One who came into our world not to be served but to serve, and give his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45).

Now, at a basic level, I think this reminds those of you who are married that, in normal circumstance, sex *should* be happening as part of your mutual and loving service to one another. But the other-person centeredness of these verses reminds us not just that sex should be happening but that it should be happening in the right way... Seeking to give, not simply to get.

You see, I think we've been conditioned by pop culture when it comes to sex. Our tendency is to think primarily in terms of getting not giving. That's why hook up apps like Tinder are so popular – people can simply swipe through the images of real people like they were choices on a menu, until someone appeals to their sexual appetite.

Selfishness in sex is what the whole porn industry is built on - the presumption that people will care more about their sexual appetites than they will about faithfulness to a spouse or about the immorality of contributing to an industry that uses and abuses women.

Married believers are to be different when it comes to sex with our spouses. We are seeking to give, not simply to get. So what does this actually look like in marriage? Well, at a base level, it comes back to communication – you need to communicate with your spouse in marriage to know how best to serve them in sex. Both husbands and wives need to know what gives the other person pleasure, and what doesn't. What helps them within the realm of sexual intimacy and what hinders them.

If one spouse desires a time of deep conversation and cuddling to feel comfortable with sex, the other should happily give that.

If one spouse finds a particular aspect of sexual intimacy uncomfortable, the other person should hear that, and avoid that.

One of the things I will say to couples in pre-marriage counselling who are thinking ahead to sex within marriage is “to go as fast as the slowest person.”

Paul’s idea of “marital duty”, his comments about bodies belonging to each other is not simply a call to have sex in marriage ... It’s a call to have sex in the right, other-person-centred way.

And so to those of you who are married, maybe it’s good to do some self-evaluation at this point. Does your approach to sex suggest you are more out to get or give? Does it suggest you are more out to love your spouse or love yourself?”

So, Paul has given two big reasons to pursue sexual intimacy in marriage – it’s a help in the fight for holiness. It’s part of a spouse’s loving duty.

*The Exception.*

But Paul does provide an exception to his general exhortation to have sex in marriage. And you see it in verses 5-6:

*<sup>5</sup> Do not deprive one another [Paul’s general position on the matter] —except when you agree for a time, to devote yourselves to<sup>(a)</sup> prayer. Then come together again; otherwise, Satan may tempt you because of your lack of self-control. <sup>6</sup> I say this as a concession, not as a command.*

So what do we learn about the exception to regular sexual intimacy here? A few things: (1) both spouses need to agree to it, (2) it is for a limited time and (3) it is a concession not a command – that is, it’s like Paul is saying “I’m not commanding you to take breaks, but if you, but if you want to that’s fine.”

Now, are we to deduce from this that the *only* exception to regular sexual intimacy is for couples to devote themselves to focused prayer in their marriage? I don’t think the text demands that understanding. In fact the principle of other-person centredness that runs through these verses would suggest there are other very legitimate reasons to take a break from sex in marriage – for the good of a spouse. For example, one spouse may be experiencing a time of sickness or grief. A wife might be recovering from childbirth.

For the other spouse to insist on sex in such circumstances would actually be unloving and selfish. So there are other real-life examples where Paul concedes that sex will need to pause.

Now, in some of these circumstances the pause on sex may actually need to go for an extended period of time – I’m thinking particularly of times of ill health or physical recovery. This is a reminder to us, that as much of a help as regular sex is in marriage, it *cannot* be the only silver bullet in the fight against sexual temptation that Paul says is real during times of pause (v.5). And to return to a point made earlier, this is why married people, not just unmarried are called to cultivate sexual self-control in their lives. What might this look like?

- Praying regularly for the Spirit to help you fight temptation.
- Making wise choices about what you watch, read, listen to. Going to bed *with* your spouse rather than lingering around your computer or phone alone late at night.

- Inviting other friends into your life to help encourage you in this.

There will be exceptions to the pattern of regular sexual intimacy in marriage and thought needs to be given to what it will look like to endure through them in a godly way.

### **3. Paul's counsel to the unmarried (vv.7-9)**

So, to recap where we've been... Sex within marriage is not something to be avoided, but pursued. It is both a help in the fight for holiness and a part of the way a husband and wife fulfill their marital duty to love and build up one another.

Paul now turns his attention to the unmarried Corinthians who are listening to this letter get read out. And it's almost like Paul anticipates what some people will be saying following his comments to the married about sex. "See, we told you champions of celibacy that marriage and sex was good! Paul just said so didn't he!? Paul wants us all to be married and having sex." But notice what Paul says immediately following his words to the married. Notice where his preference lies. Look at verse 7:

*<sup>7</sup> I wish that all people were as I am. But each has his own gift from God, one person has this gift, another has that.*

*<sup>8</sup> I say to the unmarried<sup>[e]</sup> and to widows: It is good for them if they remain as I am. <sup>9</sup> But if they do not have self-control, they should marry, since it is better to marry than to burn with desire.*



Paul's desire, his wish (v.7) is that people remain as he is – single/unmarried. This option is not bad, but good (v.8)! Now this immediately flies in the face much of our culture that views singleness and celibacy as something that is inherently wrong and a problem to be solved.

Oscar Wilde famously said that “Celibacy is the only known sexual perversion.”

But Paul is clear that singleness and marriage are gifts from God. Gifts that may change in time, but gifts nonetheless. Part of the problem is that singleness is thought of as the gift no one wants to receive – kind of like a pair of hideous socks you know will remain hidden in the drawer for all time. Yet Paul does speak of singleness as a good thing. Later in this chapter, Paul will speak about the way in which singleness gives room for an undistracted devotion to the Lord. But, we're going to think more about the why of that in a couple of week's time when we look at what else he says about it in verses 25ff.

So, singleness is a good option. But so is marriage, says Paul – especially for those who are struggling to keep their sexual desire under control (v.9). “It is better to marry than to burn with desire.”

Application.

Now, we'll continue to think about Paul's words to the unmarried in two weeks, but just for now, I want to finish by briefly thinking through some application about verse 9. Should you get married if you're struggling with self-control sexually?

Well, in many ways the answer to that question will depend on your circumstances. For example if you're a 17 year old boy (or girl) struggling with self-control, marriage probably isn't the answer. Not because it's not a help in this area – Paul says it is... But because it's

simply not wise and practical for you right now. The bible also speaks of the need to love the person you marry in a servant hearted way like Christ (Ephesians 5) – that requires a certain level of maturity that, by and large, takes time to develop. It speaks of the need for people to provide for themselves and their families (1 Tim 5:8). These are just two big factors the scriptures also want you to take into consideration – to ignore them, rush into marriage, may well create more problems than it solves.

But, that is not the case for everyone. For others of you, the answer may well be to get married and not delay. Again, this will take wisdom to discern, but it's always good for us not to try and be smarter than Scripture. If scripture says it is better to marry than to burn, we have to take that seriously and see it as God's good counsel to us.

Again, this doesn't mean we ignore real issues in a relationship and just go get married because of sexual urges. It does mean that where marriage is a real and good option and where you find yourselves enduring real and challenging sexual desire, getting marriage *is* a good thing. This is a good reminder for those of you who are already engaged or dating and thinking about engagement. Maybe don't have that hugely long engagement period if it just means you will continue to burn with desire in an unhelpful way. It is better to honour God, rather than to have the perfect wedding day. It is better to honour God and get married in winter than wait for Spring. It is better to marry than to burn with desire.

### **Conclusion.**

Tonight God's word has helped us think about sex within its proper place of marriage. It's *good* because it is both a help in the fight for holiness and an act of love to one's spouse.

But I suspect that for some of us here, this topic brings up all sorts of difficult emotions:

- Some of you might be feeling disappointment over desire not yet realised.
- Some of you might be feeling anger over the way you have been sinned against sexually.
- Others might be feeling grief and guilt over the way you know *you* have sinned sexually.

That's why I just want to finish by directing your eyes to Jesus. The one who was Himself celibate and yet honoured marriage. The one who promises to bring all sin to account (including sexual sin) on the last day. The one who gave up his own body to death on a cross to cleanse us from the guilt of sexual sin and give us new life.

Whether you're married or unmarried, I would encourage you to entrust your life, your emotions, your future into His good hands. He understands. He helps. He saves.

Let's pray