



Central Peninsula Church

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1 Corinthians 7:1-9
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The Intimate Marriage

SERIES: *Sex, Marriage & Singleness from God's Point of View*

We're continuing this morning on our series of messages from 1 Corinthians 6-7 on Sex, Marriage and Singleness from God's Point of View. Last week we talked about purity, specifically about sex outside of marriage. This week we're talking about intimacy and the role that sex plays within marriage.

Paul writes extensively about sex to the Christians living in Corinth because they were living in a sex-crazed society, much like today. They worshipped Aphrodite, the love goddess, by engaging in sex with temple prostitutes. Even their views on marriage were twisted. Corinthian society recognized four types of marriage: Tent Companionship in which two slaves could choose to live as husband and wife. Many Christians were in this position. Common Law in which a couple was considered legally married after extended cohabitation. Sales Transaction where a bride was purchased. And Full Ceremony which included vows, rings, and a veil. It was not uncommon for someone to marry 20 times!

So when Paul taught this church about a Christian view of sexuality, they wrote back saying: "You don't know where we live." There were two groups in the church, each representing an extreme. One group was really loose and said that we can do whatever we want with our body because it doesn't really touch us on the level of our spirit. We saw how Paul dealt with them last week in chapter 6:12-20. Others went to the other extreme and believed sex was so unspiritual that Christians should never be involved, even in marriage. Paul responds to this group in chapter 7 with three instructions about sex in marriage.

I. Marriage is a safeguard against sexual sin.

The first thing he says is that marriage is a safeguard against sexual sin. Look at vv.1-2. "**Now concerning the things about which you wrote, it is good for a man not to touch a woman. But because of immoralities, each man is to have his own wife, and each woman is to have her own husband.**" It appears that the Corinthians had written Paul and asked him some questions about these things. And Paul starts out with a rather surprising statement: "it is good for a man

NOT to touch a woman." But how does that square with Gen. 2:18 where God looked at Adam and said, "**It is NOT good that man should be alone...**"? Then he went on to fashion a companion for Adam and they enjoyed a mutually satisfying sex life. Why then does Paul say it's NOT good when God says it IS good in Genesis?

Well, we know that Paul was himself single, and we know from later in this same chapter that he believed this was a preferable state for those who had that calling. But Paul was also realistic. He understood that most people don't have that calling. So he goes on and says, "**But because of immoralities, let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband.**" If you can't stay celibate in your single state, then get married. He reiterates this down in vv.8-9. "**But I say to the unmarried and to widows that it is good for them if they remain even as I. But if they do not have self-control, let them marry; for it is better to marry than to burn with passion.**" Same idea—it's best for single folks to remain as he is (single), but if they can't control their passions, it's better to get married. Why? Because it's better to get married than burn with sexual desire. So marriage is God's answer for the meeting of this need in a person's life.

By the way, notice that Paul's assumption is that sex outside of the context of marriage is immorality. Otherwise, why would he tell them to get married for this very reason? It wouldn't make any sense. Paul doesn't say, "it's good for a man not to touch a woman, but if you can't control yourself and if you're in a committed relationship, go ahead and practice a little safe sex." No! He says to get married because marriage (not dating, not a committed relationship, not even engagement) is the only proper context for sex.

This raises a whole lot of issues for us today. First of all, I know a lot of Christian single people who would agree with Paul. They struggle with their passions and they would love to get married but it seems God hasn't brought the right person along yet. So a lot of good Paul's advise is to them! "Gee, Lord, I would love to obey you here but would you please send me a few candidates?" We'll address this question in two weeks when we look more closely at Paul's advise to singles.

Secondly, what about patience and self-control? People can't just meet and say, "Gee, we want to have sex so let's get married tomorrow." They have to get to know each other and that takes time. And what about teenagers who have raging hormones but aren't even close to being ready for a marriage commitment? What do they do with this? We have to balance what Paul says here with other Scripture. We know that patience and self control is one of the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5). It's not like marriage is supposed to be a quick fix to our passions. We still have to exercise patience.

Which brings up a third issue—since when did marriage solve the problem of immorality? Since when did marriage mean that we'll never have to practice self control? I know a lot of married men and women who have gotten involved in some form of immorality, whether it be pornography or adultery or something else. I have a hard time convincing single people that they'll have to continue to exercise as much self-control in marriage as they did outside of it, and if they can't have self-control outside of marriage they probably won't exercise it within marriage either.

One more thing that's important to say, this is not the only purpose for marriage. That's kind of what it sounds like. But we have to recall from Genesis that God created marriage before immorality even existed! And while sexual expression was certainly designed to be a part of that, God created marriage for more than just sex. Sex itself is about more than just fulfilling our physical desires, but it's an act which cements a couple together in body, soul and spirit. Certainly, procreation was one of the purposes for sex, but it was also created to meet our deep need for companionship and intimacy. Ultimately, this is a reflection of God. God himself exists in an intimate relationship as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And Paul tells us in Ephesians 5 that marriage was designed to be a reflection of Christ's relationship with the church.

But even with knowing all of that, the point remains valid: marriage is God's ordained arena in which your sexual passions are to be expressed and as such it acts as a safeguard against expressing it elsewhere. And married couples need to understand that. That's why in the book of Proverbs the father counsels his son about this and says, "**Drink water from your own cistern, And fresh water from your own well. Should your springs be dispersed abroad, Streams of water in the streets? Let them be yours alone, And not for strangers with you. Let your fountain be blessed, And rejoice in the wife of**

your youth. As a loving hind and a graceful doe, Let her breasts satisfy you at all times; Be exhilarated always with her love" (Proverbs 5:15-19).

II. Marriage is the proper context in which our sexual needs are met.

This leads to the second thing Paul says about sex in marriage. He says that marriage is the proper context in which our sexual needs are met. Notice how Paul said in v.2 that "**each man is to have his OWN wife, and each woman is to have her OWN husband.**" Husbands and wives belong to each other. There is this sense of exclusivity and mutual possession that makes marriage the context in which sexual expression thrives. Sex is maximized in a context of security and commitment.

One of the great myths today is that the best sex is being enjoyed by unmarried people. Do you know that's a lie? The most authoritative research ever done on sexuality in America was conducted a few years ago at the University of Chicago. This study, the National Health and Social Life Survey, came to a shocking conclusion: "The public image of sex in America bears virtually no relationship to the truth." In fact, it explains, "in real life, the unheralded, seldom discussed world of married sex is actually the one that satisfies people the most." They found that married people are significantly more likely to say their sex life makes them feel satisfied, loved, thrilled, wanted, and cared for. The faithfully married are also least likely to report sex making them feel sad, anxious, afraid, or guilty. And married men and women are also least likely to report lacking an interest in sex.

Wow! That's a far cry from what we see on TV! The average adolescent views nearly 14,000 instances of sexual material during just one TV season. And I would wage a bet that 90% of those are done between those who are married. That's why I still miss *The Cosby Show*. One of the reasons I loved that show was because you knew Cliff and Claire enjoyed each other in that way. They were different than Ward and June Cleaver, who if I recall had separate beds. Even as a kid, I never could quite figure that one out! But in *The Cosby Show* every time Cliff went to bed he had that look in his eye. And Claire didn't seem to mind! But it was clear they had a great relationship in that way, and they were married! That is rare for today TV, but not in real life.

These verses tell us that not only is sex maximized in the context of the covenant of marriage, but in the context of mutuality between husband and wife. Look at vv.3–5. "**The husband must fulfill his duty to his wife, and likewise also the wife to her husband. The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does;**

and likewise also the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. Stop depriving one another, except by agreement for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer, and come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control." Notice how Paul is careful to put husband and wife on equal footing in this area. Three times he makes it clear that what is true of the husband is also true of the wife. It's not all about meeting a man's needs, as we're sometimes led to believe. There is a mutuality in this. And this places responsibility on both husband and wife to know and understand how to fulfill our spouse in this area. Have you noticed that men and women are wired differently when it comes to sex? Husbands tend to think they can get home from work at 8:00 pm, change into a smelly old t-shirt, eat dinner, belch, read the paper, pass gas, watch a little TV, and basically ignore their wife, and then hit the bedroom ready for some great sex. They can't understand why their wife isn't interested. No wonder a recent survey of 1,000 American women found that most valued their favorite clothes more than sex, and would gladly abstain for 15 months in exchange for an entirely new wardrobe! Most of you women are thinking, "Well, yeah. Makes sense to me."

But men are different. When men get in that mood, you know, you have ONE THING on your mind. In your head, you are a man on a mission! And you just can't understand why your wife doesn't share your mission! She may be with you in body, but in HER head she's in the frozen food department at Safeway! But wives also need to understand how important this area is to their husbands. Often times women think men are just basically like animals. That's all they want and that's all they think about. But this touches men at a much deeper level than women think. It's much more about a man's sense of worth and identity. A wise wife will understand that.

The idea is to meet EACH OTHER'S needs. As a matter of fact, Paul says that's our duty, our obligation. Some people take this to mean they can demand sex from their spouse, but that's against the whole spirit of this passage and against the whole spirit of the New Testament. We're not called to demand our rights; we're called to serve one another. And the best sex takes place when we're not thinking of our own needs but the needs of our spouse. One of the things that couples need to do to make this work is to communicate with each other. Somehow, somewhere, in the mix of a married couple's life together they need to talk about how to meet each other's needs in this area. Let me remind you that communication involves talking and listening. If you and your spouse can't talk about sex without fighting there is a communication breakdown and

you need to work on that. And whatever you do you need to mutually agree on. This is NOT a time for a husband to exert his headship over his wife. This is a time for him to serve and love and listen.

In v.5 Paul says "**Stop depriving one another.**" Most likely there were some Christians in Corinth who had come out of a background of sexual immorality who thought it better not to have sex at all. So they were depriving their spouses all in the name of God. Paul says to stop it. The only time to be abstinent as a married couple is when you both agree on it for a specific purpose, namely prayer. Now I happen to think you can have a good sex life and a good prayer life at the same time, but there are times when a couple could say, "You know, let's really focus on prayer for a few days. We have this desperate need to pray together so let's forego sex to do that." It's kind of like fasting, but not with food.

Paul says you can do that but only do it for a time and then come together again. Notice that his assumption is that married couples need to have sex regularly. I'm amazed at how many couples rarely have sex. But I shouldn't be amazed because sex is a kind of barometer of a relationship. A lack of sex is symptomatic of other problems. Couples don't have sex regularly for a variety of reasons, but mostly it has to do with anger, bitterness, resentment that hasn't been dealt with. Or sometimes it's something as mundane as just being too busy and exhausted at the end of the day. You can even be so busy and tired from serving the Lord that you don't have time or energy for each other. There are couples who always put the kids first and ignore their own intimacy. Something is wrong with that. Couples need to look at that stuff and deal with these issues and work on making time for each other.

Couples who don't have sex regularly will be tempted elsewhere and Satan takes advantage of this. By the way, that doesn't give anyone an excuse for immorality. If you have a pornography problem, don't blame your wife for not being more available to you. That's your issue. But if you and your spouse aren't enjoying a mutually satisfying sex life you're putting yourselves in a position where Satan can destroy your marriage through infidelity. And he loves to do that. So we need to deal with that which keeps us apart.

III. Marriage is a gift from God.

The third and last thing this passage teaches us is that marriage is a gift from God. Look at what Paul says in vv.6-9. "**But this I say by way of concession, not of command. Yet I wish that all men were even**

as I myself am. However, each man has his own gift from God, one in this manner, and another in that. But I say to the unmarried and to widows that it is good for them if they remain even as I. But if they do not have self-control, let them marry; for it is better to marry than to burn with passion." When Paul says, "I say this by way of concession, not of command," he means that you have the right to get married but it's not a command. You don't have to get married, but it's okay to get married if you want to and need to. Then Paul says his own opinion is that he wishes every one could be single like he was. He says if they are single it's good for them to remain single. But he makes this statement in the middle of v.7 that I want you to notice. He says, **"However each man has his own gift from God, one in this manner, and another in that."** What's he talking about? He's talking about the fact that some have the gift of remaining single and others have the gift of being married. Both marriage and singleness are gifts from God. We'll talk about what this means for singles in two weeks, but for now I want to consider the implications of that for those of you who are married. The most obvious implication is that if you have the gift of marriage, do not live like you're single! In other words, don't try to be abstinate. Enjoy all the pleasure of a healthy sex life with your spouse.

But it's not just about sex. There are a lot of married people who live like they're single in other ways. The fact is they still live together but they've given up on their marriage a long time ago. They've declared a truce, which means "you do your thing and I'll do mine. Just don't get in my way." But that's not how we handle a gift. A gift is something we cherish, something we're grateful for, something we enjoy. Do you see your marriage as a gift? Do you cherish your spouse in that way? Do you thank God for your wife or husband? Or has your marriage become a chore? Do you find yourself daydreaming about a way out?

The fact is, even the best marriages go through times where you just have to hang in there. We have to realize that marriage is a gift in those times as well, because especially in those times God is using marriage as part of the sanctification process. Marriage and even sex becomes the training ground for becoming like Christ. I like what Philip Yancey says about this: "Marriage strips away the illusions about sex pounded into us daily by the entertainment media. Few of us live with over sexed supermodels.

We live instead with ordinary people, men and women who get bad breath, body odors, and unruly hair; who menstruate and experience occasional impotence; who have bad moods and embarrass us in public; who pay more attention to our children's needs than our own. We live with people who require compassion, tolerance, understanding, and an endless supply of forgiveness. So do our partners. Such is the ironical power of sex: It lures us into a relationship that offers to teach us what we need far more—sacrificial love."

We need to cherish and thank God for this gift of marriage. What a gift to have a lifelong companion and lover. What a gift to have someone who will walk with us throughout all of life and never leave us. But perhaps most of all it's a gift because it's teaching us to be like Christ.

CONCLUSION

This morning we're celebrating communion. It's a good time for us to remember the perfect love of Jesus Christ. We know that Jesus was single in a human sense, but we also know that he entered into a kind of marriage covenant with us, the church, the bride of Christ. He sacrificed his security and his comfort and his status. In coming from heaven to earth, he laid aside his divine rights, and became not just a man but a man who was put to death as a common criminal on a Roman cross. He has promised to never leave us nor forsake us, even when we continue so often in our unfaithfulness and rebellion. He continually invites into the most intimate of all relationships as we commune with him in prayer. This morning as you think about your own gift, whether it be in marriage or in singleness, remember Him.

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