



This marriage video reminds me of what Alan King said, “Marriage is nature’s way of keeping us from fighting with strangers.” Or what Helen Rowland said, “To be happy with a man, you must understand him a lot and love him a little. To be happy with a woman, you must love her a lot and try not to understand her at all.”

We’re continuing our series of messages from 1 Corinthians. The apostle Paul has been writing about some very personal issues. Last week we talked about purity. He addressed a group in the church that basically said anything goes. If you want to go out and visit one of the prostitutes from the temple of Aphrodite, feel free. What you do with your body doesn’t matter because it doesn’t really impact your spiritual life. Paul corrected that thinking in chapter 6. He said it matters a lot. Your body was made for the Lord; it’s the temple of the Holy Spirit; it was bought with a price by the Lord Jesus himself.

But in today’s passage Paul addresses a different group. This group represents the opposite extreme. While the other group was very loose, this group was very strict. They said not just sex but marriage should be avoided at all costs. It was more spiritual to stay single. They advocated what we call celibacy; not just for priests like we see in the Catholic Church today but for everyone serious about their walk with God. The idea was sex is somehow defiling and marriage is somehow distracting. By the way, every church has this strain of hyper-spirituality in it and it’s dangerous. Paul responds to this group in chapter 7. The essence of what he says is unless you have a very special calling on your life to remain single, the most God-honoring thing you can do is get married and stay married and enjoy a fulfilling sex life with your spouse. He says four things about this.

### **Marriage honors God as a safeguard against sexual sin.**

The first thing he says is marriage honors God because it’s a safeguard against sexual sin. Look at verses 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.**

Notice the Corinthians had written Paul and asked him some questions about all this. Paul starts out with a surprising statement: *“it is good for a man NOT to touch a woman.”* By the way,

that word “touch” was a euphemism for having sex. So it sounds like Paul is advocating celibacy. But Paul isn’t advocating this. Instead, he’s quoting a slogan used by the pro-celibacy folks in Corinth. This wasn’t Paul’s teaching, but theirs. We know this doesn’t square with Genesis 2 where God looked at Adam and said, *“It is NOT good that man should be alone...”* Then God went on to fashion a companion for Adam and they enjoyed a mutually satisfying sex life. Why would Paul say it’s **not** good when God says it **is** good in Genesis?

We know Paul himself was single, and we know from later in this same chapter he believed this was a preferable state for those who had that calling and gift. Look what he says down in verses 7–9.

**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.**

Paul wants single folks to remain single like he is, but he’s realistic; not everyone has that gift. If they’re like most people and can’t control their passions, it’s better to get married. That’s a gift too. Don’t you love how down to earth Paul is. I think even Paul would admit more people have that gift than the gift of celibacy. That’s what he gets at in v. 2 when he says, *“Because of immoralities, let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband.”* It’s like, “There’s so much temptation out there it’s better to get married.” Marriage is God’s answer to meet this need.

By the way, this isn’t the only purpose for marriage. That’s kind of what it sounds like. If this were true, a lot of 17-year-olds would be getting married! But we know from Genesis God created marriage before immorality even existed! God created it for more than just sex. It’s about more than just fulfilling our physical desires. It also meets 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. Not only that, marriage was designed to be a reflection of Christ and the church. Something else I should mention is marriage doesn’t solve the problem of immorality. I know a lot of married people who get involved in some form of immorality, whether it’s pornography or adultery or something else. If you’re single

this may surprise you but patience and self-control are necessary for married people, too. It's not like marriage is a quick fix to our passions. We still have to exercise self-control.

But even with knowing all of that, the point remains valid: Marriage honors God as a safeguard against sexual sin.

### **It honors God when spouses meet each others' sexual needs.**

This leads to the second thing Paul says about this: it honors God when husbands and wives meet one another's sexual needs. One of the great myths today is the best sex is being enjoyed by unmarried people. That's a lie! Research shows married people are more likely to have a satisfying sex life than single people. You'll never see that on TV! According to most TV programs, single people are the only ones having great sex. But look at verses 3–6.

**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. But this I say by way of concession, not of command.**

Notice how Paul is careful to put husband and wife on equal footing in this area. Three times he says what is true for 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. This means both husband and wife need to know how to fulfill each other in this area.

The idea is to meet **each other's** needs. Paul says that's our duty, our obligation. Some people take this to mean they can demand sex from their spouse, but that's wrong. We're not called to demand our rights; we're called to serve one another. 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 talk with each other. Somewhere in the mix of a married couple's life together they need to talk about how to serve each other in this area. If you can't talk about it without fighting there is a communication breakdown; address that. By the way, this is **not** a time for a husband to exert his headship over his wife. This is a time for him to serve her and listen.

In v. 5 Paul says *"Stop depriving one another."* Again, there were some married Christians in Corinth who thought it better to abstain. They believed in a kind of "spiritual marriage" and were depriving their spouses in the name of God. Paul says, stop it! You guys are way too spiritual! The only time to be abstinent as

a married couple is when you both agree on it in order to pray. Even this, he says, is a concession, not a command.

Paul says do that but only do it for a time and then come together again. You want to abstain for prayer—keep it brief! His assumption is married couples need to have sex regularly. I heard of a young girl in late grade school who heard some foul words at school. She asked her mom about them. Her mom said, "Those are bad words that kids use to rudely describe something good that God gave us to enjoy." Like a pro, her mom explained the "facts of life." After a careful explanation of the intimacy that occurs between a husband and wife, the young girl was trying to digest it all. One of seven children, she asked her mom: "You mean you and daddy did that seven times?" That's not how it's supposed to be. But sometimes it is. That's because sex is like a barometer of our marriage. A lack of sex is symptomatic of other problems: anger, bitterness, resentment, workaholicism. There are couples who always put the kids first and ignore their own intimacy. Something is wrong with that. Couples need to work on making time for each other.

Couples who don't have sex regularly will be tempted elsewhere. 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. You need to deal with that. But if you and your spouse aren't enjoying this area you're putting yourselves in a position where Satan can destroy your marriage through infidelity. So we need to battle those things which keeps us apart.

### **It honors God when believers that are married stay married.**

The third thing he says is it honors God when believers who are married stay married. Again, there were some "super-spiritual" people in Corinth who thought they should just leave their spouse and be one with God alone. Look at verses 10–11.

**But to the married I give instructions, not I, but the Lord, that the wife should not leave her husband (but if she does leave, she must remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband should not divorce his wife.**

Notice that Paul says what he will say came from the Lord, not himself. Jesus talked about this on several occasions (Mt 19:3–9). He prohibited divorce and remarriage with one exception, and that's in the case of what he called "immorality." He used a word for "immorality" that refers to every kind of illicit sex with another person. Jesus recognized sexual infidelity constitutes a violation of the marriage covenant that is so deep divorce is allowed. This shows us how serious sexual sin really is. There is nothing that touches us at such a deep level as sex. That's why Jesus saw it as the consummate act of betrayal which can justifiably end a marriage.

Nevertheless, infidelity doesn't require divorce, it just permits it. Jesus wasn't teaching that the innocent party must or even should divorce an unfaithful partner. When there's genuine repentance and change in an unfaithful partner there can be forgiveness and healing. I know many couples who've found healing in their marriage on the other side of adultery. They have good marriages. They have a scar and wish it never happened. But God can heal.

Notice also what this means for remarriage. In v. 11 Paul says *"but if she does leave, she must remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband."* Paul isn't talking here about one who leaves because of adultery. Because of what Jesus taught, his assumption is if you divorce your spouse because of his or her adultery, you **can** be remarried. But here Paul is talking about cases where adultery wasn't the issue. He recognizes sometimes two believers do separate or get divorced on illegitimate grounds. He says, "But if..." We always need to leave room for the "But ifs." There were people like that in the church at Corinth, which tells me that people like that **can** and **should** still be part of the church. They shouldn't be excluded or condemned. Paul wants them to stay married, but if they leave they should stay single or be reconciled.

Let me just add there are some situations that Jesus or Paul didn't address. What about abuse? I believe if a wife is being physically abused she should leave. That's a deep violation of a person. Unless there's repentance and proven change, at the very least separation is the right course of action.

And what does this mean for someone who has been divorced against God's will and then remarried? Should you leave the later marriage since it was considered adultery? No. Even though the second marriage shouldn't have been done, it shouldn't now be undone. It's a real marriage. A couple who repents and seeks God's forgiveness shouldn't think of that marriage as ongoing adultery, even though that's how the relationship might have started.

It's also important to factor in that some were divorced for the wrong reasons before they were believers. Does this mean they can they never remarry? In 2 Cor. 5:17 Paul says, *"Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come."* This tells me a person who becomes a believer with a divorce in their past shouldn't have that held against them; they're a new creation in Christ. This doesn't mean that no attempt at reconciliation should be made if that option is open and if the Lord leads in that direction. But, where reconciliation is impossible, a new life should allow a believer to remarry in the Lord.

### **It honors God for even those married to an unbeliever to stay married, if they can.**

The last thing Paul says is addressed to a different group: believers who are married to unbelievers. To them he says it honors God when even they stay married, if they can. Paul would never encourage a believer to marry an unbeliever, but often times a husband or wife would come to Christ after they'd already been married. Some began to wonder if perhaps they should leave the unbeliever since Christ calls us to put away our old way of life. Perhaps they thought that they should leave for the sake of the children. What if my unbelieving wife or husband influenced my children to turn away from Christ? Shouldn't I leave? Again, this is that disease of super-spirituality. Paul says, "No! Stay married, even to an unbeliever, if you can." Look at verses 12–13.

**But to the rest I say, not the Lord, that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he must not divorce her. And a woman who has an unbelieving husband, and he consents to live with her, she must not send her husband away.**

When Paul says this is him speaking and not the Lord he doesn't mean his words don't carry the same weight. He simply means he's now going to address a situation on which the Lord didn't speak. This is still the word of God! He says if an unbelieving spouse wants to stay in the marriage the believer mustn't divorce him. Spiritual incompatibility is **not** grounds for divorce. It certainly can make for a difficult marriage. If you're in that situation, you know how hard it is. Sometimes it's hard to come to church because you see couples where both share faith in Christ and you long for that. We need to pray for, encourage and love folks married to unbelievers.

Paul goes on and states why they're not to leave in v. 14.

**For the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her believing husband; for otherwise your children are unclean, but now they are holy.**

This doesn't mean the unbelieving husband and children are automatically saved because of you. The word "sanctify" means to set apart. Paul means your spouse and children are set apart in the sense that they're now under the influence of the Gospel. We might think the believer will be corrupted by the unbeliever, but Paul says it's the other way around; they'll be influenced by you. That's not a guarantee they'll come to Christ, but it is an encouragement that they may. If you're in that situation, God

understands. You feel like you're less of a Christian because your husband or wife doesn't share your faith. Sometimes you feel like being married to them holds you back from growing in your faith. But this should free you to love your unbelieving spouse with all your heart. Be the best wife or husband you can be. This should give you hope. Your children are set apart by your faith, and so is your husband or wife. You're not defiled by them; they're sanctified by you.

But what happens if your unbelieving spouse wants to leave you? Look at verses 15–16.

**Yet if the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave; the brother or the sister is not under bondage in such cases, but God has called us to peace. For how do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife?**

Paul envisions a situation where the unbeliever chooses to leave. He says if they desert you and are determined not to return, let them go. When he says you're not "under bondage" he means that the bond of marriage has been broken and you're free to remarry. The reason we should let them go is we're called to peace. You can't live in peace if you try to force an unbelieving partner to stay with you when they don't want to. How do you know if you'll save them? You can't guarantee you'll win your unbelieving spouse to Christ, so if they want to leave, let them leave. Again, I would say if this happens, you're free to remarry, but this time marry a believer!

## Conclusion

So let me summarize all of this: Unless you have a very special calling on your life to remain single, the most God-honoring thing you can do is stay married and enjoy a mutually fulfilling sex life with your spouse. Being "spiritual" doesn't mean you deny your humanity. Marriage honors God as a necessary safeguard against sexual sin. It honors God when husbands and wives meet one another's sexual needs. It honors God when believers that are married stay married. It honors God for even those married to an unbeliever to stay married if they can.

I'll finish by speaking to a few different groups of people. First, if you're single and contemplating marriage it's important to know what you're getting into. Marriage is God's gift, but don't enter it casually. Before you take the step, seek the Lord in prayer, seek counsel from wise people, give yourself plenty of time to prepare. Studies show that most people who get divorced had a

gut feeling before the wedding that the marriage wouldn't last. Some of you are single and want to be married, but the Lord hasn't provided the right one yet. In two weeks we'll address your situation more carefully. But as painful as it is to wait, hold out for God's best. Let God forge you and shape you into a person who will be a great husband or wife.

Second, if you've been broken by divorce know God still loves you. God hates divorce but he doesn't hate divorcees. You may have been abandoned, but God will never abandon his children. His healing and his grace is available. He'll even give you the power to forgive that person who left you. Maybe you're the one that needs forgiveness. If you come to the Lord with a repentant heart he won't turn you away. Divorce or adultery isn't the unforgivable sin.

Finally, if you're struggling in marriage, there is hope. Maybe you're thinking about calling it quits. Jesus said divorce happens because of "hardness of heart." Is your heart hardening towards your spouse? You may have a tough time hearing this, but in almost every situation I can think of it's worth hanging in there. God doesn't hate divorce because he's a hateful God, but because he loves you and he knows you. He knows that decision will create wreckage beyond imagination in your life and in those you love. Divorce, as a cure, is far worse than the disease. The best reason to stay married is because God's word tells you to. And do you know what? There's something worse than being in a bad marriage. It's displeasing the Lord. Don't buy into the lie that the most important thing is for you to be happy. God has much more important things in store for you than that.

Now you can stay in a marriage and still be hardened against your wife or husband. So, besides just staying in the marriage, let God soften your heart. Confess your bitterness and resentment and unwillingness to forgive. Accept that marriage is hard work. Look in the mirror and focus more on changing yourself than your spouse. Learn to say "I'm sorry." God loved you when your back was turned to him, now do the same for your spouse. If you need to, get help. We have some resources here. Call one of our pastors. Seek out a Christian counselor. Go to our **Love and Respect** class. Call us for about getting a mentor couple. Just don't give up. And perhaps most importantly, pray. Pray that God would change you. Pray that God would restore your love for one another as a reflection of Christ's relationship with the church.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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