

**Sermon preached by Pastor Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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MARRIAGE MATTERS

1 Corinthians 7:1-9

It was the day before her wedding, and a nervous bride-to-be was experiencing some pre-wedding jitters, concerned that she might not make it through the ceremony properly. So she went to see her pastor, who assured her that everything would be fine. He said: “When you enter the church tomorrow and the processional begins, you’ll be walking down the same aisle you’ve walked hundreds of times before. Concentrate on that aisle. When you get half-way down the aisle, you’ll see the altar, where you and your family have worshiped for many years. Concentrate on that altar.”

(Obviously they weren’t Presbyterians, because in our tradition we don’t have an altar in our sanctuary. We have a table instead. An altar is a place of sacrifice. But Jesus, on the cross, gave His life as the once-for-all, perfect, all-sufficient sacrifice for our sins, so that no other sacrifice need ever be offered. We have a table, because at the Lord’s table – in Communion – we remember and celebrate what Jesus did for us on the cross and we give thanks to God for the benefits of His grace.)

Back to the story. After encouraging her to focus on the aisle and then the altar, the pastor said to the bride: “Then, when you’re almost to the altar, you’ll see your groom, the one you love. Concentrate on him.”

The bride was greatly relieved, and left to prepare for the big day. When the moment arrived, she walked down the aisle on the arm of her father with her chin up and her eyes bright – a radiant, confident bride. But those near the center aisle were a bit surprised to hear her repeating over and over again: “Aisle, altar, him. Aisle, altar, him. Aisle, altar, him.”

“I’ll alter him.” The truth is that many brides secretly or not-so-secretly think that they will change the man they marry. Someone has observed that women hope men will change after marriage but they don’t. Men, on the other hand, hope women won’t change but they do.

Socrates, the Greek philosopher, offered this advice regarding marriage: “By all means marry. If you get a good wife, you’ll be happy. If you get a bad one, you’ll become a philosopher.”

I’m happy to say I don’t ever expect to become a philosopher!

Marriage is the subject the apostle Paul takes up here in 1 Corinthians 7. If you can remember back to the summer and fall of last year – before the fall stewardship season, before Thanksgiving and Advent and Christmas – perhaps you will recall that we were engaged in a series of messages from 1 Corinthians. We had made it through the first six

chapters of 1 Corinthians. In those chapters Paul dealt with a number of serious problems in the church at Corinth, including divisions in the church, pride, the scandal of sexual immorality in the church and the church's failure to discipline blatantly sinning members, and the problem of lawsuits among believers.

Now, beginning in chapter 7, Paul turns from these pressing problems he had heard about to the specific questions about which the Corinthians themselves had written to him. In the remainder of 1 Corinthians he will go on to address such matters as:

- marriage, divorce and singleness (here in chapter 7)
- eating food offered to idols – and the larger question of Christian freedom (in chapters 8-10)
- propriety in public worship and the Lord's Supper (in chapter 11)
- spiritual gifts (in chapters 12-14)
- the resurrection of the dead (in chapter 15)
- the collection for the church in Jerusalem (in chapter 16).

In each of these, Paul presents his teaching in response to a particular question or concern raised by the Corinthian believers as they sought guidance from the apostle on how to apply the truth and principles of the Christian faith to life in Corinth.

The first topic Paul tackles is marriage. Specifically, in verses 1-9, he has something to say about both marriage and singleness.

I need to say right here that I recognize that in our church family and in the assembly today are people who fit a variety of different descriptions. Some of you are happily married. (At least I hope and pray that is the case.) But others of you, I suspect, are unhappily married. Your marriage hasn't lived up to your hopes or dreams or expectations. It hasn't turned out the way you thought it would. You have been disappointed by marriage.

Some of you have lost your spouse, either as a result of death or divorce. Some of you are single by circumstance and have a desire, if it is God's will, to be married (or to be married again). Others of you are single by choice. You are happily unmarried, whether for a season or for a lifetime.

Some have no desire to be married. Some are not yet married. Some are newly married. Others have been married for much longer, some by the grace of God for as long as 30 or 40 or 50 or even 60 years (like Bill and Louise Humphrey, who will celebrate their 60th wedding anniversary this week).

Whatever your particular situation may be, there is a place in the plan of God for you. There is a place in the family of God for you. There is a place in the church – a place here at Faith – for you. And God's Word applies to you right where you live, in the particulars of your situation.

The first thing I want you to notice here is that marriage is not superior to singleness, and singleness is not superior to marriage. Both singleness and marriage are gifts (or *charismata*) from God. That is what Paul means in the context of verse 7, where he says that “each man has his own gift from God, one has this gift, another has that.”

The Message is helpful in bringing out the meaning of what Paul is saying. Its paraphrase of this part of verse 7 goes like this:

“...celibacy is not for everyone any more than marriage is. God gives the gift of the single life to some, the gift of the married life to others.”

We need to be careful, in our attitudes and actions, in our words and ministries and relationships, that we do not treat those who are single like second class citizens in the church, as if somehow there were something wrong with them because they are not married. God calls some to be single, either for a lifetime or for a season. And to some God gives the gift of singleness.

John Stott, for example, the British Anglican Bible expositor and author, long-time pastor of All Souls Church in London, now in his 80s, has lived a life of celibate singleness. The gift of singleness enabled him to focus his time and energies and talents in ways a married person could not have done.

Another example is a woman named Henrietta Mears, who had an enormously influential ministry as Director of Christian Education at Hollywood Presbyterian Church in California from 1928 until her death in 1963. She started a publishing company for Sunday School curriculum called Gospel Light. She founded the Forest Home Christian Conference Center. She had a profound influence on hundreds of men who went into full-time Christian ministry, including Bill Bright, the founder of Campus Crusade International. Because she had the gift of celibate singleness, she was able to devote her full energies to the service of Christ unhindered by family responsibilities.

That was Paul’s situation, too, at the time he wrote 1 Corinthians. It is clear from what he says that Paul was unmarried – contentedly unmarried – when he wrote this letter. While we don’t know for sure, most biblical scholars believe Paul had been married at one time and either his wife had died or perhaps his wife had left him, possibly after Paul’s conversion from a rabid persecutor of Christ’s followers to a follower of Christ himself.

Whatever the case, Paul considered his unmarried state not to be some kind of handicap or deficiency, the way some Christians view singles in the church today, but as an advantage in carrying out his work for the kingdom of God. Not God’s will for everyone, but God’s will for him.

We also need to acknowledge the danger that in our defense of the institution of marriage as God established it, and in our desire to promote strong, healthy, God-honoring, Christ-centered marriages, we may either intentionally or unintentionally elevate marriage or the

family to the status of an idol, and worship it instead of reserving our worship for the one true God who instituted and established marriage for the welfare and happiness of humankind – and for the fulfillment of His kingdom purposes.

Singleness is good, for those who are called to singleness. And marriage is good, for those who are called to marriage.

So what does Paul mean in verse 1 when he says: “It is good for a man not to marry”? More literally, verse 1 says: “It is good for a man not to touch a woman,” meaning “to have sexual relations with a woman.”

Is Paul stating a biblical principle here under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit? Or is he repeating an opinion expressed by some of the Corinthians in their letter to him, in order to respond to it? I think it is the latter. There were some in the church at Corinth who held some rather twisted views on marriage and sex. As we observed in previous messages in this series, Corinth was a sexually-oriented city. The Corinthian Christians found themselves in a sex-saturated, sex-obsessed, sex-driven place. Not unlike the culture in which we find ourselves. Ours is not the first generation or society to struggle with sexual temptation. The Corinthians were exposed to it every time they turned around. It was seemingly everywhere. True, they didn’t have television or movies. They didn’t have the internet with all its temptations. They didn’t have glossy magazines at every supermarket or convenience store check-out. But there were sexual temptations all around them. And they were right out in the open.

Some of the Christians in Corinth reacted against the sexualization of their culture by overreacting. They concluded that all sex was bad and to be avoided or renounced, even sex in marriage. And they embraced celibacy as a higher form of spirituality. In their reaction against the sexual license and immorality of their city they swung completely to the other side, flatly rejecting what God had created for us to enjoy – within the proper boundaries.

Paul, however, doesn’t buy into their thinking. He affirms both marriage and sex as the gift and plan of God. The general rule, Paul says, is that people should be married. He says in verse 2 that “since there is so much immorality” – because of the prevalence of sexual temptation – “it is good for a man to have a wife, and for a woman to have a husband” (TM). To serve as a counter to the sexual temptations all around us is not the only reason for marriage, but it is one reason. And it is a good one. I like the way Eugene Peterson expresses it in *The Message*: “Sexual drives are strong, but marriage is strong enough to contain them and to provide for a balanced and fulfilling sexual life in a world of sexual disorder.”

Sex is good. It is a good gift of God. Any view of sex that diminishes its goodness or considers it dirty dishonors what God has given us as a gift and intended for our pleasure. But God designed this gift to be protected and to be experienced within walls of security that only marriage, as God Himself designed and established it, can provide. That is why

Solomon is so insistent in his warning against seeking sexual fulfillment outside the covenant of marriage in Proverbs 5:15-19. There he says:

Drink water from your own cistern,
 running water from your own well.
 Should your springs overflow in the streets,
 your streams of water in the public squares?
 Let them be yours alone,
 never to be shared with strangers.
 May your fountain be blessed,
 and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth.
 A loving doe, a graceful deer –
 may her breasts satisfy you always,
 may you ever be captivated by her love.

So Paul, like the Bible as a whole, affirms both the goodness of marriage and the goodness of sex in marriage. His primary point in verses 3-5 is that sex in marriage is designed for the fulfillment of each partner. Listen again to *The Message*:

The marriage bed must be a place of mutuality – the husband seeking to satisfy his wife, the wife seeking to satisfy her husband. Marriage is not a place to “stand up for your rights.” Marriage is a decision to serve the other, whether in bed or out.

Paul is sometimes mistakenly accused of being a male chauvinist. What he says here about mutual responsibilities in marriage shows how far off-base that charge is. He says it is just as much a husband’s responsibility to satisfy his wife sexually as it is the wife’s responsibility to satisfy her husband sexually. There is no double standard. Both have equal rights to the other’s body, equal authority over the other’s body, and an equal responsibility to give himself or herself to the other in order to meet the other’s needs.

In marriage there is, as Ray Stedman has said, or there ought to be, “a beautiful reciprocity.” In the giving of yourself to meet the needs of your mate and to give your mate pleasure, you find your own needs met, as each of you gives yourself to the other.

If you’re married, Paul says, you don’t have an exclusive claim to your body. Your body doesn’t belong to you alone. It belongs to your spouse as well. So just as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6:20 that you should honor God with your body, take care to honor your spouse with your body as well.

And notice this: Sex or the withholding of sex in marriage is not something to be used as an instrument of power, either as a bribe or reward for “good behavior” or as a punishment. Paul says in verse 5: “Do not deprive each other except by mutual consent” – only if both husband and wife are in agreement – “and then only for a set period of time, for the express purpose of devoting yourselves to prayer. Sex in marriage is such an important thing that it must be a mutual decision if you are going to abstain from it for

a period of time. Neither the husband nor the wife has the right to go on a fast from sex unilaterally. To deprive your mate except by mutual agreement is to cheat your mate, and to give Satan an opening in our lives where he knows so many of us are vulnerable. Don't do it. Don't give Satan that opening. If you agree to abstain from sex for a period of time, make sure you come back together again to fulfill one another's needs.

Finally, in verses 8-9, Paul considers the circumstances of believers who were once married but are no longer. He is not talking here about those who have never married but about those who have been widowed or divorced. His advice to them is this: It is good to remain single, like Paul, if you can be happily unmarried. But if you burn with sexual desire, it is good and appropriate to get married, if God provides the opportunity.

Our culture today, not unlike the 1st century Corinthian culture, considers the satisfaction of our sexual desires a right and assumes that virtually everyone from adolescence on is sexually active, regardless of one's marital status. The Bible's standards – God's standards and expectations – regarding our sexual behavior are much different. Sexual intimacy is not a natural right or a civil right. Under the sovereignty of God, it is a marital right. Which is to say, it is something to be reserved for and experienced and enjoyed only by a husband and wife within the boundaries of the covenant of marriage.

God calls those who are married to a life of sexual purity and exclusive fidelity to their mate. And God calls those who are not married, whether never married or not now married, to a life of sexual purity as well, to a life of chaste and celibate singleness until, if He chooses, God should give you a mate.

Obedience to God in those things is not always easy. Sometimes it is very hard. But His way is best. His grace is sufficient. And in the end, the rewards are great.

May it be so in us, to the glory and praise of God. Amen.