

WHAT ABOUT MARRIAGE?**1 Corinthians 7:1-16****(Read 1 Corinthians 7:1-16)**

INTRO: What about marriage? Is it a dying institution? Is it valid anymore?

“It’s just a piece of paper – and we don’t need a piece of paper of live together. Right?”

These, and similar ones, are questions that have been asked more and more over the last three or four decades. In fact, it seemed like marriage was increasingly seen as little more than an outmoded and almost unnecessary formality until the so-called gay marriage issue came up over the past 15 years. Then suddenly it became, at least in this country, a constitutional right.

Well, marriage is still a vital part of a healthy society – and specifically, Biblical marriage. It may be a dying institution in our dying culture but it is just as valid as when, referring to Adam and Eve the writer of Genesis said, and Jesus quoted . . . *a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.* Genesis 2:24. And I say “Biblical marriage”, since, gay marriage can be found nowhere in scripture. Marriage is a building block of a strong society, and so it’s good we look at it now as Paul brings it up in his letter to the Corinthian Church in 52 A.D. Now, truth be told, he is obviously addressing some questions that had come to him in Athens. As a matter of fact, he spends most of the remainder of the letter addressing questions posed to him in that correspondence.

Let me also say that Paul’s treatment of the subject marriage here in chapter 7 has been much maligned by people who like to call into question the subject of marriage in the Bible. Here is my response to that: This is not Paul’s final word on marriage. In fact, it might be his first word on it. Paul was a pastor, and let me tell you from personal experience pastors get asked all kinds of questions and I’m sure my answers to questions on marriage and sex 35 – 40 years ago would have been a lot less developed than they are now. If you want to know what Paul really thought about marriage you need to look at his soaring description of it as an illustration of the relationship between Christ and his Church in Ephesians 5.

Here Paul is going on his experience with marriage himself and also what he knew the Hebrew Scriptures and Jewish teaching understood. Furthermore, he was helping converts from a pagan culture understand what Godly marriage entailed. We’ve repeatedly established that Corinthian culture was steeped in activity and belief that was exceedingly corrupt and in many ways Paul had to start from the ground up in developing what holy living consisted of.

So, Paul turns from confronting the things he had heard coming from Corinth like their divisions, factions, the undermining of his teaching, a sick incestuous relationship, lawsuits between church members, and homosexuality, and he addresses the questions that have been sent to him. Right off the bat he addresses marriage and proper sexual relationships.

To unpack this I’m going to get some help from Norman Hillyer in the New Bible Commentary as he takes our passage and breaks it down into four questions that Paul answers for the Corinthians and it makes for a helpful outline. Here is the first question . . .

Are married couples to continue normal sexual relations after conversion?

- YES! That’s the simple answer anyway in verses 1-7. Specifically the question came in the form of a quote “*It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.*” 1 Corinthians 7:1b. There are two ways of looking at this question. It could have been coming from extreme asceticism (that is, denying one’s self of food, comfort, or pleasure) or extreme freedom. Both are wrong. One denies what God has designed marriage to sanctify and the other makes a mockery of God’s plan. As I said in several messages over the previous two chapters, Paul is dealing with the initial tendrils of Gnosticism in the idea of extreme freedom which said that the body could do what it wanted as long as the mind was on God.
- It is more likely the Corinthians thought sex to be impure and therefore unholy. This is understandable in a culture that sexualized everything including religion. Paul is saying sex in a marriage relationship keeps the Corinthians free from fornication since there is *sexual immorality* (v 2a) and also maintains monogamy, *each man should have sexual relations with his own wife, and each woman with her own husband.* (v 2b).
- The problem seems to have been that some spouses, most likely wives, had been denying sexual relations to their partners, most likely husbands. While this was an effort to be holy, it seemed to be causing those weak partners to seek sexual satisfaction with temple prostitutes.

- Paul tells the Corinthian married couples they owe sexual satisfaction to one another. The NIV puts it this way, *The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband.* (v 3). That word “fulfill” is translated from a Greek word signifying indebtedness. In other words, fulfilling one another’s sexual needs is a debt rather than a favor. And the only way they should refrain from sexual relations is by mutual and harmonious agreement. (v 5) and only for a limited time for the purpose of seeking God in prayer.
- Paul says that he wished everyone could be celibate like him. (explain Paul’s marital situation) He points out that celibacy is a gift that some have and it would be good for the Kingdom if all had that gift, but all do not. Therefore marriage is a gift for those who are distracted by unsatisfied sexual appetite.
- The next question requires a shorter answer. . .

Should the unmarried marry?

- It depends. Once again, in verses 8 and 9, Paul recommends celibacy. Our text in the NIV specifies that by “unmarried” he means those who are widowed, divorced, and otherwise single because they have never married.
- Paul again holds up his own celibacy as the ideal in verse 8 but assures those who cannot control their sexual appetites that marriage is the only option to protect those who *burn with passion* (v 9). Here is an example of how it would appear that Paul has not fully developed his theology of marriage. This is indicated by the way he refers to what he has from the Lord in verse 10 and what is from his own pondering in verse 12. His thinking and teaching is still formulating in comparison to his beautiful teaching in Ephesians 5.
- The next question is this . . .

Is divorce permitted to a Christian couple?

- No! That’s the quick answer and it’s the best answer. This is where Paul has a word from the Lord when he says, *To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife.* (vv 10-11).
- Jesus had an exemption clause for divorce in Matthew 5:32 and Matthew 19:9, (look them up)but Paul doesn’t refer to it here. In both of those cases Jesus gave the exemption to be in the case of marital unfaithfulness. We don’t know what the presenting issue is for this question, but it seems to be addressed to couples who are both Christ Followers. He doesn’t offer coaching for what to do if marital problems arise, only that the couple should remain together and if they do divorce, they should remain single or be reconciled.
- However, to a certain extent, he does offer advice on the idea when he answers the final question . . .

When one partner gets converted, should old relationships continue with the unconverted spouse?

- The answer is yes. In the final four verses he addresses the idea that marriage can be a witness to the unconverted. Specifically he is addressing the idea of the status of marriage of a convert to a person who has remained in a pagan and unconverted state. He advises the Christ Following spouse to stay in the relationship with all that relationship entails as long as the unconverted person remains with them.
- Apparently the concern was that some Christian Corinthians were worried that their marriage to pagan Corinthians was endangering their salvation. Paul assures them that quite the opposite is the case. Rather than dragging the Christ Follower down, the pagan had more hope of salvation as they witnessed the work of Holy Spirit in their believing spouse. This was marriage as witness. Not only that, but God will protect the believer and their children even as they live Christ out in front of their family.
- However, Paul does allow that some unbelieving husbands and wives may choose to divorce the believing spouses and if that happens “*let it be so*”. In that case the obligation is gone. I love how Paul puts it so let me read it again, *But if the unbeliever leaves, let it be so. The brother or the sister is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace. How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?* (vv15-16). The point is, the believing spouse is not to initiate separation or divorce but strive to win their pagan spouse to Christ.

- Shouldn't that be what any spouse does, whether their loved one is a believer or not? We should live Christ out in all our relationships, most of all we need to consistently live out Jesus in front of those who do not know him . . . yet.

Conclusion: So, what about marriage? These questions we've answered here in 1 Corinthians 7 seem at first glance to be from another time and another culture, but as you truly examine them it's easy to see they fit into our increasingly post-Christian culture. It shows us once again the relevance of the Word of God for living in the 21st century and it helps us be the Church in Challenging times. Amen.