

**Dear Abby (aka – Paul) ...**  
*I Corinthians 7:1-16*

Chapter seven of First Corinthians deals with the subject of marriage. Everyone seems to have opinions and advice on marriage:



Kids were asked some questions about marriage and these are their answers:

**How do you decide who to marry?**

You got to find somebody who likes the same stuff. Like, if you like sports, she should like it that you like sports, and she should keep the chips and dip coming. -- Alan, age 10

No person really decides before they grow up who they're going to marry. God decides it all way before, and you get to find out later who you're stuck with. -- Kristen, age 10

**What is the right age to get married?**

Twenty-three is the best age because you know the person FOREVER by then. -- Camille, age 10

No age is good to get married at. You got to be a fool to get married. -- Freddie, age 6

**How can a stranger tell if two people are married?**

You might have to guess, based on whether they seem to be yelling at the same kids. -- Derrick, age 8

## **What do you think your mom and dad have in common?**

Both don't want any more kids. -- Lori, age 8

## **Is it better to be single or married?**

I don't know which is better, but I'll tell you one thing. I'm never going to have sex with my wife. I don't want to be all grossed out. -- Theodore, age 8

It's better for girls to be single but not for boys. Boys need someone to clean up after them. -- Anita, age 9 (bless you child)

## **How would the world be different if people didn't get married?**

There sure would be a lot of kids to explain, wouldn't there? -- Kelvin, age 8

And the #1 Favorite is.....

## **How would you make a marriage work?**

Tell your wife that she looks pretty, even if she looks like a truck. -- Ricky, age 10

Back in First Corinthians, chapter five, Paul references a letter that he had received from the believers in Corinth. When we come to chapter seven, Paul shifts from dealing with issues that had been reported to him and turns to answer questions that were raised in that letter – a letter, by the way, that has not survived time. So we have to take our clues from the way Paul relates back to the letter.

Turn in your Bible to First Corinthians, chapter seven. Notice how he opens: “Now concerning the matters about which you wrote...” Seven more times in this letter besides this one, Paul will refer to questions put forward in the previous letter.

It is important that we understand that this is not a theological treatise on marriage or sexuality. Chapter seven doesn't give us all that God wants us to know about those subjects. Paul is giving a response to very specific questions that have been put to him in a letter. So we have to understand first the situation out of which the questions spring, do good interpretation and, only then, move to application.

I want to play with the format for our consideration this morning. Let's put it in the form of letters to *Dear Abby* (aka – Paul). Here's the first question:

*Dear Paul,*

*My husband says that the body is holy, joined to Christ. Therefore, we should refrain from sexual relations. What do you think?*

*(Signed), Frustrated Wife*

The last part of verse one is, most likely, a statement from the Corinthians' letter that represented the perspective of some in the church. "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman."

The NIV translates this as "not to marry." That doesn't really capture Paul's meaning here. The literal Greek rendering is: "not good to touch a woman." *Touch* is a biblical euphemism for having sexual intercourse.

Remember that last week I talked about the two schools of thought in Greek philosophy and religion in dealing with the body. The first was that the body was of no concern; only the soul and spirit mattered. There-fore, what you did in the body was irrelevant to the soul. This led to a libertine attitude, expressed among Christians this way: "I am saved; I am forgiven; therefore I can do anything that pleases me."

This was the problem that Paul addressed in chapter six involving sexual relations with prostitutes. Paul reminded them that their bodies belonged to the Lord; their bodies were the temple of the Holy Spirit and they should glorify God with their bodies.

The other school of thought promoted asceticism. This perspective is that the body is evil; it is something that must be suppressed or to use the old English word: *mortified*. All the instincts and needs and desires of the body should be denied. This led some in the church to conclude that it was wrong for married couples to engage in marital sex.

Paul's answer encompasses both this question and the next which relates to singleness. He walks a fine line between the two and displays great diplomatic skill. Because he prefers that people would remain single as he was at this time, he could have openly supported celibacy in Christian marriages or, given the very family-oriented background in his Judaism, which strongly promoted marriage, he could have just condemned celibacy altogether and put a great burden on those who remained single.

Let's look at Paul's answer to the first question – **I Corinthians 7:1-5**

Paul says that the sexual aspect of the marriage relationship is important. One reason is that should one spouse deprive the other of this pleasure, it could lead to sexual immorality outside of the marriage bond.

Then he goes on to speak of something that is profoundly significant, something that should be understood by every couple entering marriage and those already married. Paul says two things we must not miss:

1) The first is that each spouse owes a debt to the other. When a man and a woman marry, they pledge their bodies to each other. Paul admonishes them to fulfill this obligation within the marriage.

The verb tense Paul employs indicates a habitual duty. You are to regularly give to the other. In this way, Paul stresses the action upon giving rather than getting. This isn't a matter of sexually exploiting the other – getting what you want, when you want, how you want. This is the expression of love which seeks the other's best and unselfishly gives to please the other and to meet their needs. Couples should enjoy sexual intercourse often enough, however they wish to define that, so that neither is frustrated or tempted to look elsewhere to have their needs met.

2) The second thing he says is that when you enter into the marriage contract you yield authority over your body to your spouse. Again, this is to be worked out in loving giving, not selfish getting. If one is concerned most about meeting the needs of their spouse, over whose body they have authority, then you minimize the possibility of manipulation and exploitation.

It is not “Your body is mine. I can do whatever I want with it.” Instead, husbands and wives should give themselves to the other for the other's pleasure.

The remarkable feature in this chapter, illustrated in verses three and four, is the equality that Paul presents in the bond of marriage. This is so contrary to the way of thinking about and treating women in the first century and earlier. At least six times in this chapter, Paul puts the duties and responsibilities within marriage equally upon the man and woman, the husband and wife. This is just amazing. Richard Gantz writes:

Remember that this was written almost two thousand years ago, to a world that hardly acknowledged the humanity of woman. But the Scriptures did, and Jesus always did, and now, coming to the subject of sexual intimacy in marriage, the Scriptures recognize something else. They recognize the sexuality of the woman as well as that of the man.

In doing this, Paul isn't contradicting himself in other places where he discusses roles in marriage. He is talking here about discharging the sexual duties incumbent upon both parties in the marriage.

In marriage, the husband and the wife are called upon and make a commitment to meet the needs of their spouse. Every couple I counsel before marriage, I share the following from

Dr. Willard Harley. In over 40 years of marriage counseling experience, Dr. Harley has identified basic, general needs of men and women in the marriage relationship.

Here are his conclusions from the book *His Needs; Her Needs*. These are generalizations; not every man and woman will fit completely in this profile, though I think the vast majority will.

A woman's five most basic needs in marriage are:

- 5) Family support
- 4) Financial support
- 3) Honesty and openness
- 2) Conversation
- 1) Affection

A man's five most basic needs in marriage are:

- 5) Admiration
- 4) Domestic support
- 3) An attractive spouse
- 2) Recreational companionship
- 1) Sexual fulfillment

What happens in many marriages is that when one is not having their needs met, they use blackmail against the other. For the wife, it is withholding sex; for the husband, it is withholding affection. If not careful, the stage is set for the deterioration and even the disintegration of the relationship.

Paul says, "Do not deprive each other of sex unless you do so, by agreement, for a limited time. Then be sure to resume your sexual relations lest you should be tempted in that area." This is one of a handful of situations where we are told in the New Testament that a foothold might be gained by Satan if we are not careful.

Okay, Paul moves on to address another question:

*Dear Paul,*

*Is it better, then, to be single?  
(Signed), Lonely in Burke*

Look at Paul's response: **I Corinthians 7:6-9**

Paul, most likely, had been married before. Rabbis almost always were married; members of the Sanhedrin were required to be married. There is a hint in Acts, chapter 26, that Paul was a member of the Sanhedrin prior to his conversion. Whether his wife had died or left him after his conversion, we just don't know. But his current *Facebook* status was "Single." I should add, "Single, and not looking for Ms. Right."

I believe that what lay behind Paul's perspective was his view of the end times. He clearly thought that Jesus was going to return in his lifetime. We have a hint of that later in this chapter – look over at **Verse 29**.

We will see more of his reasoning next week when we look at the rest of chapter seven. But here, he tells those who are single that if God has given them the gift of self-control sexually, he would prefer that they remain single. Though Paul wishes that those unmarried would remain in that state, he does not promote this state as better or more spiritual. What he does reject as wrong is *porneia* – sexual immorality.

If someone unmarried does not have this gift, they should marry. In the Greek text, this is not a suggestion, not a concession, but rather, a command.

Another question that must have been asked of Paul in the letter had to do with divorce.

*Dear Paul,*

*Is it okay to divorce my spouse?*

*(Signed), Looking for a Way Out*

Paul's response: **I Corinthians 7:10-11**

This question might have been precipitated by those giving advice to people who were married with a spouse that was withholding sex because of the ascetic philosophy. Paul reminds them of Jesus' teaching regarding divorce.

In Mark 10, the Pharisees tested Jesus by asking about the Jewish legality of divorcing one's wife. Jesus responded by discussing the reason behind this concession – the hardness of the heart. When they were alone, his disciples asked him again about the matter. And he replied:

Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her, and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery. – *Mark 10:10-11*

Paul is speaking here in First Corinthians seven to husbands and wives who are Christians and exhorting them to be obedient to Jesus' instructions regarding those who are married. If married, stay married; if separated, remain unmarried with the hope of reconciliation.

For a complete picture regarding divorce, we can't depend just upon this passage. Jesus, himself, permitted divorce on the grounds of sexual immorality. Read Matthew chapters five and nineteen.

Paul is just responding to the situation as presented to him by the Corinthians in their letter. This isn't intended to be a comprehensive statement on legitimate grounds for divorce. Further consideration of this topic, one that is very applicable even with Christians, is outside our scope this morning. I know it is a difficult and painful subject for so many, and the church needs to address the topic humbly, sensitively, and biblically.

There is one more question that Paul addresses and we need to examine before leaving the text:

*Dear Paul,*

*Should I divorce my unbelieving spouse? Will I defile myself if I remained married to them?*

*(Signed), Perplexed and Confused*

You can just imagine the confusion and uncertainty created as individuals were responding to the Gospel and putting their trust in Jesus. So many who were married and coming to faith yet had a spouse who had not converted to Christianity.

What were they to do? Should they divorce the spouse? Were they somehow defiled to be in a sexual relationship with one who did not believe as they did? Look at Paul's response to their concern:

### **I Corinthians 7:12-16**

The first thing we need to note is his statement: "To the rest I say (I, not the Lord)...." Paul isn't going out on a limb here and making something up. This isn't Paul just speaking "off the cuff" and therefore his opinion is questionable.

Paul claimed inspiration of the Holy Spirit in what he was saying. Look at the concluding verse in this chapter:

And I think that I too have the Spirit of God. – *I Corinthians 7:40*

Paul's point is that he is not appealing to a direct statement by Jesus as he did regarding divorce in earlier verses. Rather than put words into Jesus' mouth or misrepresent him, Paul speaks from the realm of the Spirit. Craig Blomberg writes:

Here he can cite no word of the earthly Jesus but relies directly on his own sense of how God is guiding or inspiring him.

In Paul's view, he is speaking with the authority of Jesus without Jesus' direct words. And he intends that the believers in Corinth understand that.

Paul says that if the unbelieving spouse consents to remain in the marriage, the believing spouse should likewise remain and not seek a divorce. However, if the unbelieving spouse leaves, then the marriage bond is broken and the believer is free from the obligation of marriage.

At the base of Paul's admonition is the perspective that the unbelieving spouse (and any children) benefits from the presence of the believer. New Testament scholar, William Barclay, writes:

(Paul) has the lovely thought that the unbelieving partner is consecrated by the believer. They two have become one flesh and the wonder is that in such a case it is not the taint of heathenism but the grace of Christianity which wins the victory. There is an infection about Christianity which involves all those who come into contact with it....

In a partnership between a believer and an unbeliever, it is not the believer who is brought into contact with the realm of sin; it is the unbeliever who is brought into contact with the realm of grace.

By remaining in the marriage, the believer may be used of God in the process of the unbeliever coming to faith in Christ. But Paul warns that this is not always the case.

Whew, we have covered a lot of territory today. Some difficult things, but necessary perspectives if we are to live out God's plan for our lives whether married or single. Next week we will round out Paul's teaching on these subjects.