

This morning, I am continuing in my sermon series called The Gospel Changes Everything, based on the New Testament book 1 Corinthians, Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth, a church he started around the year 50 AD. He has since left the church in the hands of other leaders so that he might start other churches, and he writes this letter around the year 54-55 AD in response to what he is hearing about some of the issues in the Corinthian church. In chapters 6-7, which we began looking at last week, Paul turns his attention mainly to sexual issues that he sees in the church.

In this week's passage, Paul responds to some questions that the Corinthians have asked in a letter to him. Specifically, there are some who believe that sex is dirty and defiling, not something a person of God should participate in even if they are married. Last week, we saw that the attitude of the Corinthian culture towards sex was that it was an appetite to be filled, like hunger. Apparently, in response some Christians had swung the pendulum too far the other way and were committing to celibacy, even within marriage, because they believed it was more holy and Christlike.

And secondly, there are some Christians who are married to spouses who do not believe, and they are asking whether it is better to get divorced, if perhaps their unbelieving spouse is causing them to be less holy.

Let me begin by saying that it is important to recognize that this is not "the book on marriage." This is a letter responding to issues raised by the Corinthian church where Paul answers in the light of Scripture and God's design for marriage. So while this passage has a lot of wisdom for us, do not read this as a comprehensive treatment of marriage, divorce, and singleness. And as I said last week, consider this an invitation to a conversation. Each of you comes from unique situations, so if you would like to talk about your specific situation further, please reach out.

Let's read chapter 7. Paul's main message to the Corinthians is to be faithful to God in whatever circumstance you find yourself, for in Christ you already have the love that you are seeking, and you will enjoy it to the fullest forever.

1 Corinthians 7:1-40 - Now for the matters you wrote about: It is good for a man not to marry. ² But since there is so much immorality, each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband. ³ The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. ⁴ The wife's body does not belong to her alone but also to her husband. In the same way, the husband's body does not belong to him alone but also to his wife. ⁵ Do not deprive

each other except by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. ⁶ I say this as a concession, not as a command. ⁷ I wish that all men were as I am. But each man has his own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that. ⁸ Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I am. ⁹ But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion. ¹⁰ To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. ¹¹ But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife. ¹² To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord): If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. ¹³ And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. ¹⁴ For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. ¹⁵ But if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace. ¹⁶ How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife? ¹⁷ Nevertheless, each one should retain the place in life that the Lord assigned to him and to which God has called him. This is the rule I lay down in all the churches. ¹⁸ Was a man already circumcised when he was called? He should not become uncircumcised. Was a man uncircumcised when he was called? He should not be circumcised. ¹⁹ Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God's commands is what counts. ²⁰ Each one should remain in the situation which he was in when God called him. ²¹ Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you-- although if you can gain your freedom, do so. ²² For he who was a slave when he was called by the Lord is the Lord's freedman; similarly, he who was a free man when he was called is Christ's slave. ²³ You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men. ²⁴ Brothers, each man, as responsible to God, should remain in the situation God called him to. ²⁵ Now about virgins: I have no command from the Lord, but I give a judgment as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy. ²⁶ Because of the present crisis, I think that it is good for you to remain as you are. ²⁷ Are you married? Do not seek a divorce. Are you unmarried? Do not look for a wife. ²⁸ But if you do marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned. But those who marry will face many troubles in this life, and I want to spare you this. ²⁹ What I mean, brothers, is that the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they had none; ³⁰ those who mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they were not; those who buy something, as if it were

not theirs to keep; ³¹ those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away. ³² I would like you to be free from concern. An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord's affairs-- how he can please the Lord. ³³ But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world-- how he can please his wife-- ³⁴ and his interests are divided. An unmarried woman or virgin is concerned about the Lord's affairs: Her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit. But a married woman is concerned about the affairs of this world-- how she can please her husband. ³⁵ I am saying this for your own good, not to restrict you, but that you may live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord. ³⁶ If anyone thinks he is acting improperly toward the virgin he is engaged to, and if she is getting along in years and he feels he ought to marry, he should do as he wants. He is not sinning. They should get married. ³⁷ But the man who has settled the matter in his own mind, who is under no compulsion but has control over his own will, and who has made up his mind not to marry the virgin-- this man also does the right thing. ³⁸ So then, he who marries the virgin does right, but he who does not marry her does even better. ³⁹ A woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, but he must belong to the Lord. ⁴⁰ In my judgment, she is happier if she stays as she is-- and I think that I too have the Spirit of God.

So in this chapter, Paul answers their questions about marriage, singleness, sex, and divorce, and he does so by encouraging them to view those things in the light of eternity. As he puts it: ²⁹ *What I mean, brothers, is that the time is short.* and ³¹ *For this world in its present form is passing away.* I think that we will best understand his words if we put them in the larger Biblical context of marriage and eternity. I will go through this quickly for the sake of time. Let's begin with the end in mind, so to speak.

The big picture of marriage begins in Genesis 2, where God creates humanity male and female and says in **Genesis 2:24** - *For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.*

Throughout the Bible, God's clear design is what I called last week "holy sexuality," to borrow a phrase from the author Christopher Yuan: chastity in singleness, faithfulness in marriage between a man and a woman. People throughout the Bible and history rebel against that design, but the design remains.

Throughout the Old Testament, God uses marriage imagery to illustrate His relationship with His people, and uses the language of spiritual adultery when He

talks about our sin. In other words, sin is not just rule-breaking; it is loving anything more than we love God.

In the New Testament, we find that the ultimate purpose of marriage is not just companionship or having children; marriage is meant to point to the relationship between Jesus and His people, the church. We read about this in **Ephesians 5:21-33**, where tells wives to submit to their husbands as the church submits to Christ, and husbands should love their wives as Christ loved the church and laid down His life for her. The way a husband and wife love and serve each other in Christian marriage is meant to be a sign pointing people to Jesus' love for His people, a picture of God's love for us.

And then, Jesus tells us in Matthew 22 that when we finally are with Jesus, marriage and sex will disappear and no longer be needed. We no longer need the sign, because we have the real thing. In Matthew 22, a group of religious leaders called the Sadducees, who did not believe in life after death, ask Jesus a question in hopes of exposing how ridiculous views on the afterlife are. Jesus replies with:

²⁹ Jesus replied, "You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God. ³⁰ At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven.

Notice how Jesus responds. In heaven, there will be no marriage. There will be no sex. They will not be necessary. **Jesus responds by saying that if you think there is marriage in heaven, you don't understand the Scriptures or the power of God – you don't realize that there is something greater in store.** If you are married, you and your wife will no longer be husband and wife in heaven; the long-lost reunion with your departed spouse that is so popular in culture may not be exactly as you envision in your head when you arrive in heaven. Not that you won't be reunited, but Jesus is saying that the joy of marital oneness that you experience on earth will be nothing compared to what you will be experiencing in eternity with God.

Sure enough, the Bible ends with marriage imagery:

Revelation 21:1-5 - *Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. ² I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ⁴ He*

will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." ⁵ He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."

The Bible uses wedding language to describe heaven because is the best language we have on earth to communicate the depth of love, commitment, joy, security, and ecstasy that is found in a relationship with God, both now and eternally. **Out of all the possible imagery that could have been used to describe heaven, God chose a wedding, the beginning of an eternal union.** By using this language, the writer of Revelation is communicating that eternity will be the perfect union between God and his people, where we enter into His eternal love, security, and joy forever.

So how does that inform our reading of 1 Corinthians 7?

Paul's main message to the Corinthians is to be faithful to God in whatever circumstance you find yourself, for in Christ you already have the love that you are seeking, and you will enjoy it to the fullest forever.

Implications for singles, divorced, widowed:

1) Embrace singleness as a gift and serve God wholeheartedly

⁷ I wish that all men were as I am. But each man has his own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that. ⁸ Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I am.

²⁶ Because of the present crisis, I think that it is good for you to remain as you are.

²⁷ Are you married? Do not seek a divorce. Are you unmarried? Do not look for a wife. ²⁸ But if you do marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned. But those who marry will face many troubles in this life, and I want to spare you this.

Paul elevates singleness as a very good thing, calling it a gift from God, just as much as marriage is a gift. **It's hard to appreciate just how radical this was in his day.** In those days, you had to be married and have children or you had no future, significance, or security. In fact, Caesar Augustus had widows fined if they failed to get married within 2 years, to ensure that they would not be a burden to the Roman government. As far as we can tell, Paul was the first to say it is good to be single. Christian widows did not have to get remarried, as they were cared for by

their spiritual family. Single men and women could serve God wholeheartedly while being a part of the Christian community, finding their significance in Christ and not in a relationship.

Things are not that different today. Our culture, and often the church, has elevated marriage, sex, and family as idols, to the point where singles are often viewed as deficient, having something wrong with them. And those who are not having sex are definitely viewed as weird. The more God is removed from our culture, the more people are looking to a romantic relationship to fulfill and complete them, and so singleness can feel like being unloved, unwanted.

Consider what Justice Kennedy wrote in *Obergefell v. Hodges*, the Supreme Court decision that legalized gay marriage: *“No union is more profound than marriage, for it embodies the highest ideals of love, fidelity, devotion, sacrifice, and family.”* That is the world’s view. But we know that there is a union more profound than marriage, that embodies the highest ideals of love, fidelity, devotion, sacrifice, and family, and that is our union with the Lord.

Saying yes to Jesus as an unmarried person means saying no to sexual freedom, but it does not mean missing out on intimacy. Dennis Hollinger – *“Life without sexual intimacy and marriage is not a deficient life. Rather, life without intimacy with God in Christ is deficient.”* Our longings for a spouse or for sexual union are ultimately for the intimacy that is found in the One who created us.

As a church, we have often been guilty of idolizing the biological family over the spiritual family, when, as you read in both Paul’s writings and the words of Jesus, that should not be the case:

Matthew 12:46-50 - *While Jesus was still talking to the crowd, his mother and brothers stood outside, wanting to speak to him.* ⁴⁷ *Someone told him, “Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you.”* ⁴⁸ *He replied to him, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?”* ⁴⁹ *Pointing to his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers.”* ⁵⁰ *For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”*

Paul and Jesus both teach this truth that is as countercultural today as it was back then: you can be perfectly fulfilled without marriage, children, or sex. Even if you don’t have a spouse or children, you have a spiritual family now and forever:

Luke 18:28-30 - Peter said to him, "We have left all we had to follow you!" ²⁹ "I tell you the truth," Jesus said to them, "no one who has left home or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God ³⁰ will fail to receive many times as much in this age and, in the age to come, eternal life."

The main reason Paul sees singleness as a gift is because it gives the unmarried person the freedom to serve God wholeheartedly.

³² I would like you to be free from concern. An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord's affairs-- how he can please the Lord. ³³ But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world-- how he can please his wife-- ³⁴ and his interests are divided. An unmarried woman or virgin is concerned about the Lord's affairs: Her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit. But a married woman is concerned about the affairs of this world-- how she can please her husband. ³⁵ I am saying this for your own good, not to restrict you, but that you may live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord.

You have the Lord. You already have the love that you are looking for. So consider singleness, Paul said, because you can serve the Lord without being divided. For all the good that can come with it marriage also brings trouble, as well as responsibilities that divide our heart

2) Live with sexual self-control

⁹ But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion.

Marriage is not bad, though. Often it can be hard for the single to stay sexually pure. But do not misuse this passage. Yes, it is better to marry than to burn with passion, but if you can't be self-controlled, become self-controlled first. It's not an appetite requiring you to feed it; it requires self-control or marriage.

Self-control is a sign of Christian maturity. As Christopher Yuan wrote, "If their boyfriend wants to marry as soon as possible because he doesn't want to 'burn with passion,' they should run as fast as possible away from a man lacking in self-control... wanting to have sex isn't the right reason to marry. A correct reason to marry should be when a young man is willing to give himself up for his future wife, as Christ did for the church, or when a young woman realizes that being united with her future husband will bring great glory to God and exponentially amplify

their effectiveness together to reflect and proclaim the gospel... a lack of self-control before marriage means a lack of self-control in marriage.”

3) Marry if it will enhance your service to the Lord

²⁶ *Because of the present crisis, I think that it is good for you to remain as you are.*
²⁷ *Are you married? Do not seek a divorce. Are you unmarried? Do not look for a wife.* ²⁸ *But if you do marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned. But those who marry will face many troubles in this life, and I want to spare you this.*

³⁹ *A woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, but he must belong to the Lord.*

Be faithful where you are, but if you find someone who will help you become more like Jesus and serve Him more fully then do it. Be careful not to be unequally yoked just because you are afraid of being alone or want to make sure you have children.

Implications for married people:

1) Fight for your marriage with all that you are

¹⁰ *To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband.* ¹¹ *But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife.* ¹² *To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord): If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her.* ¹³ *And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him.* ¹⁴ *For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.* ¹⁵ *But if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace.* ¹⁶ *How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?*

Paul speaks strongly about not divorcing, echoing Jesus' words and then applying it to a new situation (I, not the Lord). He addressed wives here, so most likely there were some women married to men who were not believers who were wondering

whether the holy thing to do would be to get divorced and either serve God wholeheartedly or remarry a Christian man. But Paul says no – do all you can to remain in your marriage.

Again, you need to consider this in the light of the big picture of marriage. Your spouse is not your ultimate love. We always marry the wrong person. And if we married the right person, give it time, and they will eventually change. I'm sure there is someone out there more compatible. But they will not complete and fulfill you either. Jesus is your ultimate love that your heart has been searching for. Marriage is a shadow, a temporary institution that will fade away when we have the real thing forever. In the meantime, the thing that will bring Him the most glory is not divorce, but being faithful to God in the situation in which you find yourself, learning to love when it's hard, to suffer well, to show grace, to speak the truth in love, and to be sanctified.

When Paul says they are sanctified, he is telling these wives that the unbelieving husband does not contaminate you; rather, the believer brings their spouse into the presence of God in a way that is more powerful. So stay where you are if it is possible and try to live in peace – you may save your husband or wife.

There will be times, he recognizes, that the decision to dissolve a marriage is out of your control. Even Jesus said that when a partner breaks the marriage covenant through sexual immorality, you are freed from it. And certainly in cases of abuse and addiction, there may be times that it is the most loving thing you can do to separate from a spouse, just as the loving thing to do in the church was to remove someone from membership. But the motive is love, and the goal is reconciliation. In the end, though, do all you can to bring maximum glory to God. Love, grace, forgiveness, suffering well – all of those bring glory to God.

2) Serve your spouse in and out of the bedroom

“It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman”:

“It is good for a man not to touch a woman”

“It is good to live a celibate life.”

Paul is citing a line in their letter. Some in the church believed that sex was dirty, defiling, something the holy should avoid. Some of them had apparently become celibate at their spouse's expense. The false belief he is confronting here is that married partners should abstain from sexual intercourse because it is somehow not a holy thing to do. He responds this way:

³ *The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband.* ⁴ *The wife's body does not belong to her alone but also to her husband. In the same way, the husband's body does not belong to him alone but also to his wife.* ⁵ *Do not deprive each other except by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.*

Trying to be celibate in marriage is a recipe for sexual misconduct. Paul instead encourages them to serve each other, even in the bedroom. Sex is not just for procreation but is an act that reaffirms your covenant with each other. I give myself fully to you. Marriage is a whole life commitment. Practice self-giving in marriage, even sexually. We are free to serve others. Normal sexual relations within marriage are required. Paul does not seem to be arguing that sex is only for procreation either. Abstinence within marriage must be a decision reached by mutual consent for a limited time.

This can be abused. This is not something to be demanded, but to be given. Love does not insist on its own way or seek its own advantage, but seeks to please others

3) Embrace your single brothers and sisters as family

We have idolized the biological family, but in the process done harm to our single brothers and sisters. We are all family in Christ, so live that way, including those who are single in your family.

4) Look to God as your ultimate love

²⁹ *What I mean, brothers, is that the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they had none;* ³⁰ *those who mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they were not; those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep;* ³¹ *those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away.*

Don't get overly attached to anything in this world, but look to God as your ultimate love. Live as if you don't have a wife means to recognize that marriage is a transient arrangement. The Christian life must never be identified with even the nearest and dearest of worldly experiences, however legitimate and appealing they may be.

Laughter and tears are not the last word when we evaluate our joy and sadness in the light of eternity.

Be faithful to God in whatever circumstances you find yourself. He is the one your heart is looking for, and the one who will be yours forever.

“God is the highest good of the reasonable creature, and the enjoyment of him is the only happiness with which our souls can be satisfied. To go to heaven fully to enjoy God, is infinitely better than the most pleasant accommodations here. Fathers and mothers, husbands, wives, children, or the company of earthly friends, are but shadows. But the enjoyment of God is the substance. These are but scattered beams, but God is the sun. These are but streams, but God is the fountain. These are but drops, but God is the ocean.”