

Sexegesis

Reading Paul on Love, Marriage, Etc., Etc.

Wedding season is predictable in one way. As customs change, and more couples plan destination weddings, and fewer vow exchanges happen in churches, there remains one constant among weddings that feature any nod to Christian tradition: 1 Corinthians 13 remains by far the most popular passage chosen by the couples -to-be and preached by the officiating pastor. And why not? “If...I have not love, I am nothing...Love is patient...Love never fails...The greatest of these is love...” What’s not to like?

The irony of this popular choice is, of course, that Paul the apostle did not write his famous “love chapter” for weddings. He wrote it for a church that was being strained at the seams by conflict, and specifically conflict on spiritual gifts. (We’ll get to that!) Paul talks about marriage six chapters earlier, and I have never heard a single pastor preach his primary take on marriage:

To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain unmarried as I am. But if they are not practicing self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with lust. (1 Cor 7.8)

This very unromantic -seeming view of marriage doesn’t work at weddings, but it does spark curiosity in a 21st -century mind. So, let’s read on!

The Corinthians’ Letter

Paul devotes 1 Corinthians chapters 7 through 12 to an extended Q n A session. We know from Paul’s allusions, that the apostle and the community have carried on a lively letter exchange since he departed Corinth after his 18 months with them. In their latest missive, they’ve asked Paul a few clarifying questions.

We can recognize those Corinthian questions and the issues behind them as something they’ve instigated (and not Paul’s rhetorical creations), because 7.1 begins with an overt reference: “Concerning the matters about which you wrote...” Hard to miss that clue ! Paul throws a few other breadcrumbs out to us as the next chapters unfold.

7.1 Concerning (Greek: *PERI DE*) the matters about which you wrote.

7.25 Concerning virgins...

8.1 Concerning meat that’s been sacrificed to idols...

- 12.1 Concerning spiritual gifts...
- 16.1 Concerning the collection for the saints...
- 16.12 Concerning our brother Apollos...

That must have been a long letter! As we'll see, the Corinthians didn't just list the topics. They had comments on each. (E.g., in 1 Corinthians 7 and 8, Paul quotes the back to them the stated opinions of the Corinthians' letter's author.)

- 7.1 "It is good for a man not to touch a woman..."
- 8.1 "All of us possess knowledge...";
- 8.4 "no idol in the world really exists";
- 8.4 "There is no god but one"
- 8.8 "Food will not bring us close to God."
- 10.23 "All things are lawful."

This is a lively theological conversation! These Corinthian Christians have not come hat in hand, with a list of questions. In fact, they're not asking questions at all. They're stating convictions. Paul has turned those convictions into questions, because he wants to engage them critically. Have you ever written a letter like this to your pastor?

For this session, we'll move through the first two of the Corinthians' topics:

1. Marital Relations (7.1-24)
2. Virginity and Faithful Celibacy (7.25 -40)

Let's make our way through those ancient Christian conversations now.

Topic One – Marriage Is What Brings Us Together Today

There could hardly be a more cross -culturally, cross -generationally relevant topic than marriage and romantic relationships. Our culture finds itself in what researchers are calling "The Great American Sex Drought." One expert summarizes:

We are seeing pretty marked increases in the share of people who are not having sex frequently — especially in the share of younger adults," [W. Bradford Wilcox](#), director of the National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia, told TODAY. "We have come to a day that is about 50 years after the sexual revolution and what we are seeing is a decline of sex among young adults. No one, including myself, could have predicted this. (W. Bradley

Wilcox, Dir of the National Marriage Project at UVA, quoted by M. Holohan, "America is in a Sex Drought", *Time* Apr 12, 2019)

The statistics raise concern, because sociologists know that being partnered in a devoted relationship that involves sexual relations is generally a predictor of higher levels of happiness. "These pair bond relationships are central to our wellbeing. Whenever we do something that separates us from these strong positive attachments it can have real negative implications to your overall wellbeing," said Christine Whelan, director of the "Money, Relationships, and Equality Initiative" at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. (Same article as above.)

One reason for the low rates of sexual relations is a tendency toward later marrying and a decline in the marriage rate generally. "To marry or not to marry, that is the question!" Paul has landed right in the middle of a modern American conversation. Let's see what he says.

Super-Spirituality and Corinthian Mediocrity (1 Corinthians 7.1-5)

I attended an evangelical Christian college and lived my first three years on a men's dorm floor. During one season of restlessness, the men on my floor launched a debate over whether faithfulness required them to remain celibate.

- BTR

An opening salvo came on the hallway bulletin board from the first party, each member of which called himself a "Bachelor 'til Rapture". Their signature quote was 1 Corinthians 7.1: "It is good for a man not to touch a woman."

- BURNERS

Soon afterward, a second party answered, calling themselves "The Burners," quoting 1 Corinthians 7.9: "It is better to marry than to burn with lust." They also quoted (way out of context) a verse from Songs of Solomon: "Catch the foxes, the little foxes." (S of S 2.15)

- BTROCA(IROCA)

I started this group. We hedged our bets. We were the "Bachelors 'til the Right One Comes Along (If the Right One Comes Along). We based this on the whole string of passages about marriage and singleness in 1 Corinthians 7.

This qualified as hijinks at George Fox University!

So, what does Paul mean when he quotes the Corinthians' line: "It is good for a man not to touch a woman." On first glance, this sounds very monastic -vow-of-celibacy-ish. But let's look at the whole conversation, so we can get context for this stark Corinthian claim.

Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: "It is well for a man not to touch a woman." ² But because of cases of sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. ³ The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. ⁴ For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; likewise, the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. ⁵ Do not deprive one another except perhaps by agreement for a set time, to devote yourselves to prayer, and then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. (1 Corinthians 7.1-5 NRSV)

Let's put two settings in place. The first is the social context. We already know about Paul's estimate of sexual immorality among the Gentiles: there's a lot of it! Immediately after he quotes the Corinthians' query – "it is good for a man not to touch a woman, right Paul?" – Paul effectively says, "that would be great, but because of cases of immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband." Later in the paragraph, he will refer directly to "your lack of self-control." We learned last week that Paul does not expect a whole lot of restraint from his Gentile converts. You'll remember that, while devoted monogamy ruled the day as the ethic of Jewish and Jewish-Christian communities, Jewish authors like Philo and Paul knew that this distinguished the monotheists from the polytheists.

Our second context is Paul's argument as it flows from the stark statement. We could read verses 1b to 5 as a manual for avoiding sexual temptation.

Step One – Marry.

Step Two – Each member of the couple, give the other conjugal connection.

Step Three – Don't go for long periods without conjugal connection.

Step Four – Repeat steps two and three.

This counsel, from a confirmed bachelor, no less, was designed to keep them from being tempted to adultery.

Now let's go back to that stark opening quotation from the Corinthians' letter: "It is good for a man not to touch a woman!" Since the word for man and the word for woman stand in also for husband and wife, given context an idiomatic translation of this sense would run,

“It is good for a husband not to touch his wife, isn’t it, Paul?”

Someone in Corinth – and probably a group within the congregation – has concluded from Paul’s teaching that, since abstaining from sex *outside marriage* is spiritual, abstaining from sex *within marriage* would be super-spiritual. The motive is good. “We want to be Advanced Placement Christians, Paul!

But like a conductor who knows his tenor can’t hit that high note, Paul brings a pragmatic reality into the conversation. “This I say by way of concession,” as Paul puts it in 7.6. To paraphrase,

“A man not having sex with his own wife may be great, in some sort of ideal world; but you are not up to it. So, let’s get back to the basics: share your marriage bed consistently and you’ll be less susceptible to any temptation to philander.”

It is on the same logic that Paul will speak the words that launched the “Burners” in our college-boy debate: “It is better to marry than to burn with lust!” (7.9)

Paul the Romantic Apostle

“It is better to marry than to burn with lust!” (7.9) As an ordained pastor, I guarantee you that no engaged couple has ever asked me to preach on that as the lead scripture as we’ve planned their wedding. In fact, Paul gets credit for the most popular Christian wedding passage in the Bible (1 Corinthians 13 – imagine the royalties!), but he didn’t write “Love is patient, love is kind, never boastful...” about marital love, but to the divided Corinthians as a guide to how they ought to treat one another in community.

About helping people choose whether or not to marry, Paul is quite pragmatic.

- His first concern is the Gospel of Jesus. His life is devoted to spreading good news, and he has chosen not to marry in order to do that more fully.
- Within his concern for the Gospel, he cares much about the well-being of his converts, and he believes that sexual sin has a corrosive effect on a person’s soul.

Paul offers his instruction about whether to get married, how to stay married, and when to break a marriage on these two criteria.

The Gospel

Two more chapters down in 1 Corinthians, in a moment of utter vocational clarity, Paul will exclaim, “Woe to me if I do not preach the good news!” (9.16) He shares with the Galatian Christians the moment “when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among

the Gentiles” (1.15- 16) Paul has married his sizeable ego to the progress of the gospel, and he hopes to transmit that value and passion to his converts in Corinth.

The centrality of the good news to Paul pervades both his own choices and his counsel to the Corinthians. Even after he tells them to marry and copulate, he says, “I wish that all were [unmarried and celibate] as I myself am. But each has a particular gift from God, one having one kind and another a different kind.” His rationale (and gratitude for his own gift of celibacy) come later:

The unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord; ³³ but the married man is anxious about the affairs of the world, how to please his wife, ³⁴ and his interests are divided. And the unmarried woman and the virgin are anxious about the affairs of the Lord, so that they may be holy in body and spirit; but the married woman is anxious about the affairs of the world, how to please her husband. (7.32-34)

Paul is convinced that marriage distracts one from the purposes of God in the world.

This passage heavily influenced the development of a celibate clergy in the Roman Catholic church of the Middle Ages – largely because they universalized Paul’s general claim and insisted that the gift of celibacy and the gift of priestly ministry always travel together. The disastrous impact of that assumption has been evident in a long history of clergy sexual abuse. The people who demanded celibacy of clergy didn’t stay around long enough in Corinthians to notice that Paul was fine with Peter (!) and the other apostles being married (1 Corinthians 9.5) and blessed the ministry of his favorite couple, Priscilla and Aquila. (1 Corinthians

Marriage and Divorce

In the Gentile-Christian setting of the Corinthian church, get Paul’s most searching exploration of marriage and divorce. In the Gospels, Jesus forbids divorce with a limited exception for infidelity. As you read 1 Corinthians 7.12 -16, ask yourself what Paul is teaching about marriage and divorce – and what rationale he gives for the latter. On Monday evening, we’ll look at Roman laws around marriage and divorce. For now, read and ask.

To the married I give this command —not I but the Lord —that the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does separate, let her remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband) and that the husband should not divorce his wife.

To the rest I say—I and not the Lord —that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. And if any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce the

husband. For the unbelieving husband is made holy through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy through the brother. Otherwise, your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so; in such a case the brother or sister is not bound. It is to peace that God has called us.[c] 16 Wife, for all you know, you might save your husband. Husband, for all you know, you might save your wife.

Stay the Way You Are

Did you keep your high school yearbooks? I have hauled mine through no fewer than 25 moves from one house or town or state to another. Go figure! I actually find it quite fun to look back. Recently I reorganized my office and ran across my senior yearbook, with all of the comments my classmates wrote. What surprised me was how many people wrote some version of a compliment and then added a common refrain: “stay the way you are”.

Decades later, living half a continent and a whole lot of life away from the village in which I grew up, I find that odd. When I was 18, there were a bunch of things I wanted to change! But from this distance, I guess there are a few I wish hadn’t changed.

Throughout 1 Corinthians 7, Paul returns several times to a similar locution. As you read the passages, notice the value he places on the status of the person when he or she came to faith. Ask yourself what might make “stay the way you are” a Pauline instruction.

Let’s Read Together

This is a fascinating and quite near -the-ground part of the Bible, once again. The Bible in the Bedroom could be the facetious title. But as you’ve seen, the matter is a lot more far-reaching than this. Come Monday night ready to read well together and bring what we find in the first century back to our present day!