

Sex and the Gospel

1 Corinthians 7:1-9

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As we've studied First Corinthians, one of the things I hope you've seen is that for St. Paul the Gospel – the cross of Christ – is at the centre of everything. The problem in Corinth was that they'd put other things at the centre of their religious life. Paul's been addressing the problems that were reported to him by visitors to Corinth. As we start chapter seven, he now addresses the things the Corinthians had written to him in their letter. And again we'll see the same problem: they weren't keeping the cross at the centre.

Friends, we struggle with the same problem. The first thing he deals with here is sex – and that makes a lot of us uncomfortable. And yet the reason we're uncomfortable talking about sex is because we've separated it from the cross of Christ, just like the Corinthians. Instead of engaging in sex the way God designed it, because of our sinful natures we've often abused and corrupted God's gift and made it something dirty – and for that we're right to be ashamed. What I hope you'll all see this morning is that this isn't what God intended for us and that, in fact, he designed sex in marriage to be something that teaches us about our own redemption and to be something that trains us for life and for service in his Kingdom. Look at chapter seven, verses 1 and 2:

Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: “It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman [note that in Greek “woman” and “wife” are the same word].” But because of the instances of sexual immorality, let each man have his own wife and each woman her own husband.

These two verses have been notoriously misinterpreted by a lot of Christians to say that singleness is good and that Paul just *concedes* marriage to those who are too weak to stand up to sexual temptation. The problem with that view is that Paul is talking about sex, not about marriage. From the evidence we have, we can piece

together what the Corinthians were writing him. Remember, their problem was that they thought they had arrived at the pinnacle of spirituality – that they'd already experienced the resurrection. As we saw a couple of weeks ago, that's why they didn't think the body mattered anymore. So they wrote something like this to Paul: “Okay Paul, since you're not married or seeking to be married, and since you told us not to engage in sexual immorality, in *porneia*, wouldn't it be better if we just didn't have sex at all? After all, we've entered this new age by the Spirit in which we're like the angels, ‘neither marrying nor giving in marriage.’” Remember that's how Jesus described what we'll be like in terms of our sexuality after our resurrection. So they figure, “Why not be like the angels now? Besides, since the body counts for nothing, if someone feels the need to fulfil his sexual needs he can always hook up with a prostitute.”

Now can you imagine a church where the women first refused sex to their husbands on the grounds that they'd arrived at the pinnacle of Christian spiritual maturity and at then sent their husbands off to indulge their sexual appetites with the temple prostitutes? That's messed up, but that seems to be what was going on in Corinth. In chapter six Paul dealt with the whole problem of their uniting with prostitutes. They thought it was no big deal, but Paul reminded them that it was a form of sexual immorality and, more importantly, a form of idolatry. He used that word, *porneia*, that we talked about. By withholding sex from their spouses, these women were driving their husbands to sexual immorality. Look at verse 2:

But because of the instances of sexual immorality, let each man have his own wife and each woman her own husband.

Some in the past have taken “have his own wife” or “have her own husband” to refer to marriage – as if Paul is making a concession: “If you can't be victorious over the temptation of sexual immorality, then get married.” That's *not* what he's saying. Again, he's talking to a group of people who were depriving their spouses sexually. What he's really saying is, “You guys have a messed up view of what the marriage relationship is supposed to be between husband and wife and look what's it's led you to: you've got wives who think they're super-spiritual because they don't have sex and you've got

desperate husbands whom your sending off to the temple prostitutes. That's sexual immorality – for both the wives and the husbands! Instead,” he says, “you husbands, *have* your own wife and you wives, *have* your own husband.” Now he's not saying by “have” that they should go out and get married as if they were currently single. The Greek could also be translated “take” instead of “have”. He's saying: “Husbands, *take* your own wife and wives, *take* your own husband. In short, the first things he's telling them: If you really want to demonstrate your spirituality, go have sex with your spouse!”

Brothers and sisters, sex between husband and wife is God's design. It's a *good* thing. It's not *just* for making babies. God designed sex to be the thing that unites a man and woman as “one flesh” – to be the place where they find the deepest possible intimacy with each other. There's a reason why in Hebrew “to know” your husband or “to know” your wife means to have sex with them. The act brings about not only a physical union, but a spiritual one too. And yet it's more than just having *my* needs met and *my* urges and *my* appetites satisfied. Sex is, more importantly, about fulfilling the needs of our mate. Look at verses 3 to 5:

The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. 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. Do not deprive one another [or as the King James puts it, don't “defraud” one another], except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.

St. Paul's main point here is that sex is designed for the fulfilment of each partner. I urge you to read through the Song of Solomon this week – preferably with your spouse – because Solomon's song captures this so well as it describes the courtship, wedding, and married life of a young couple who were looking to explore and to discover all the beautiful relationships that God intended for them. Solomon understood and described the differences God built into men and women: differences in our bodies, in our minds, even in our spiritual desires. And

yet in marriage God unites those differences and the Holy Spirit, through Solomon, gives us a wonderful description of the ecstasy and enjoyment and pleasure that he designed sex to be for husband and wife.

But in looking at what Paul writes here, notice that St. Paul doesn't say to the husband and the wife: "Demand your own sexual rights." He never puts it that way. And yet there are an awful lot of people – usually men, but not always – that read these verses this way. There's nothing more destructive to a marriage than for a man to *demand* that his wife submit to him sexually whenever he feels like it. If we mistake Paul's statement that the wife does not rule her own body as meaning that the husband has a license to demand sex whenever he wants, we destroy the beauty of sex in marriage. Again, there's not much that's more damaging to a marriage relationship. Paul's saying, "Don't do that!"

If you've got your Bible open, turn over to Ephesians 5:22-28. St. Paul gives us a great picture of what the relationship between husband and wife *should* look like:

Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies.

You see, God wired men and women to respond certain ways – both differently. But it's also true that because of sin, we're broken. Because of the fall, women don't naturally submit to their husbands and men don't naturally love their wives and so we fall into a cycle that's frustrating for both. Because of sin we start caring more about having our own needs met than about meeting the needs of our spouse and

so I have people come to me for counseling and read them these verses and the husband will say, "If I treat her rotten, it's because she won't submit!" And the wife will say, "If I don't submit, it's because he treats me rotten!" And yet the marriage relationship was designed by God to teach us something about redemption. We were enemies of God, failing to submit to his headship – treating him rotten — but he loved us anyway and sent his Son to die for us.

You see, women are naturally wired to submit when their husbands shows them love. And men are naturally wired to love when their wives show them submission. Sin didn't break that part of God's creation. *The key to a healthy marriage relationship is in setting aside your own rights in order to meet the needs and desires of your spouse.* Husbands, if your wife doesn't submit, love her anyway – the same way Christ loved you when you wouldn't submit to him. Wives, if your husband isn't loving, submit anyway, "as unto the Lord" the same way the Church submits to Christ. As we do that, it not only makes a healthy marriage – it also teaches us something about redemption in the process. And the same is true of sex just as much as it is of marriage in general.

Sex is never about demanding what's yours by right. It's always about offering to fulfil the desires of your spouse. Sex is about satisfying someone else. Sex is designed so that we have no control over it ourselves within marriage. We need another to minister to us, and God designed it that way to teach us how to relate and fulfil the basic law of life that Jesus gave when he said, "If you try to save your life, you will lose it" (Matthew 16:25; Mark 8:35; Luke 17:33; John 12:25). If you try to meet your own need, if you put yourself first in your life – "I'm going to have my needs met" – you're only going to lose the joy of life and everything you're trying to gain. Instead of finding fulfilment, you'll find emptiness.

Instead, Jesus tells us: Throw your life away and you'll find it. That's what sex is about. It's not about having your needs met. It's about meeting the needs of your spouse. As you devote yourself to the enjoyment of your husband or wife, and to giving him or her pleasure, you find your own needs met reciprocally. That's what

Paul means in verse 4: "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." It doesn't mean you're slaves to each other. It means that the power to give fulfilment to your spouse lies with you. Your spouse can't fulfil himself or herself alone. It's impossible. That's why sins like solo-sex and looking at pornography are so cripplingly addictive – they can never fully satisfy and only leave you wanting more. The only way to fully satisfy your God-given sexual appetites is to first give the gift of fulfilment to your spouse.

This is why it becomes such a problem in a marriage if one person becomes unresponsive sexually. Whatever the cause or reason, unresponsiveness drives a wedge between husband and wife. This is why St. Paul says, "Don't deprive (or defraud) each other except by agreement and for a limited time so that you can devote yourselves to prayer." If you're going to abstain from sex, it needs to be a mutual thing. Prayer is good, but even still, it's not good enough that you can unilaterally give up sex with your spouse for it. Maybe as a couple you need to take some time to prayerfully work through a problem and so you abstain from sex. That's okay...if it's mutually agreed. But even then, Paul says, "Don't abstain for too long!" He knows the danger involved. These are some very wise words that underscore the very thing that causes so many problems in marriage.

He goes on in verses 6 and 7:

Now as a concession, not a command, I say this. I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another.

Paul uses the word *charisma*. It's the Greek word for spiritual gift. What he's saying is that sex in marriage shows us a special gift of God. Marriage itself is a gift, just as singleness is, and some have one gift and some the other, and both express a unique quality about God himself that's intended to be manifested by that state. Paul was single. We know he was almost certainly married before, because that was a requirement to be a member of the Sanhedrin, but his wife had either died or maybe had divorced him when he became a Christian. His gift of

singleness allowed him to be the apostle to the gentiles and there are others whom God has gifted in a similar way. He gloried in being single, but he makes it clear that both singleness and marriage are spiritual gifts, and sexuality in marriage reflects the special beauty of God. It shows us something about him. It shows us the uniqueness of relationship within the Trinity, and as we saw in Ephesians 5, between the Lord and his people. It shows a oneness of spirit and identity of person that can only be seen when two people, weak and struggling and failing in many ways, nevertheless learn to live together and love each other despite the problems they experience.

On the other hand, being single and without a sexual relationship reflects the beauty of God in other ways. It allows a quality of dedication to a single goal that most married people can never have – and there's a place in the Kingdom for both. So both states of life are gifts from God and we need to see them that way. And that brings us to verses 8 and 9. What about the sexual lives of people who were once married, but aren't anymore?

To the unmarried [the Greek word here probably refers to widowers] **and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single as I am. But if they do not exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion.**

Paul's talking to those who were married, but have lost their spouses through death. In some circumstances that he'll get into later, this might also apply to some who have been divorced. Presumably some of these folks had the same problem as the married people who were deprived of sex by their spouses and were going off to see prostitutes. This is obviously a real area of concern. What do you do when you've been married and have had a full sex life that's now gone? How do you find fulfilment? And so Paul says, "If you can manage, stay single. Consider that now may be a time when you can devote yourself to service or to ministry more so than you ever could have before." Paul himself was an excellent example of the ministry that is enabled by the gift of singleness. But we do need to be careful here, because in Titus, Paul almost commands the young widows to remarry, saying that would be the best thing for

them, but that for those who are older, they ought to consider remaining single. The bottom line is what he's been telling us over and over in First Corinthians: Don't think of yourself first. Think of the cross first. Make your decisions based on what best serves the kingdom of God!

He also says to those who are now single and involved in sexual immorality, they need to remarry rather than burn with the passion of their sin. Notice he doesn't say "if they *cannot* control themselves" as a lot of our translations read the Greek, but literally, "if they *do not* control themselves." This is the one place where Paul talks about marriage as a concession. God's has equipped all of us, through his indwelling Spirit, to say no to temptation. But if you're not going to fight sin, if you're going to engage in sexual immorality to meet your sexual desires, then you need to remarry. But that aside, consider that God is gifting you anew to singleness. Consider that marriage has taught you the meaning of the cross of Christ — how to love and serve others rather than yourself — and see if God is calling you to serve his Kingdom in ways that you weren't able to before.

Let me close by reiterating the three points Paul makes about sex and marriage here. First, he stresses love to God. Two weeks ago, looking at chapter six, we heard him say that the body is made for the Lord, and so what the Lord wants you to do with your body should be all-compelling. It should govern the choices you make. Second, he stressed the importance of self-discipline – a willingness to put the needs of your spouse ahead of your own, to give the gift of beauty and love and fulfilment to one another continually. That means you need to learn what communicates love to your husband or wife, whether it's gifts, or doing things for them, or telling them you love them verbally, and then getting into practice showing your love in ways they will understand. Find ways to say to your spouse: "I'm thinking about you. You're important to me. I love you." And as Paul tells us here, one of the greatest of these gifts is sex, if it's given with that same spirit of joy and thanksgiving and gratitude and willingness to please. There's nothing more important than that, but it means you have to refuse to indulge in self-satisfaction. Third, Paul stresses what comes naturally from the

first two: we need to have mutual respect for each other.

Love to God, discipline for self, and a mutual respect for each other, that's what sex as God designed it is all about. And because of that, as two people learn to be united in the Lord, they become a witness to the world around them of the Gospel message itself. As husband and wife come to know each other better and as they learn to give of themselves, that Christ-like love can't help but spill over into other parts of their lives where it shines the light of God's love at the cross to a the world around them.

Please pray with me: Heavenly Father, we give you thanks for your Word and how it often confronts us in places where we've become uncomfortable or squeamish because of sin. Father, teach us the beauty and glory and joy of sexuality and teach us how to express it in ways that give you honour and fulfil your divine will for us. May the marriages represented here today increasingly show to the world the sacrificial love that you have shown to us on the cross, and may we all take the lessons of redemption we learn from marriage and proclaim them to a dying world. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord. Amen.