

Keeping Commitments
March 18, 2018
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1 Corinthians 7:1-13

“What is the definition of marriage?” That question has been the subject of emotional debate in recent years. There was a time not long ago that it would not have been a question at all. Let’s alter the wording: **What is the biblical definition of marriage? Why did God give us the institution of marriage? What are the benefits of marriage for the husband and wife, for the human race?**

Our Lifeway Leaders Guide provides a good biblical overview of marriage: *“Marriage is God’s unique gift to reveal the union between Christ and His church and to provide for the man and the woman in marriage the framework for intimate companionship, the channel of sexual expression according to biblical standards, and the means for procreation of the human race.”ⁱ*

Scripture confirms that...

Marriage should glorify God:

1 Corinthians 10:31 (ESV) says, *“...whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.”*

Marriage is about intimate companionship:

Genesis 2:18 (ESV) *“...God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone...”*

Marriage is the proper place for procreation:

Genesis 1:28 (ESV) *“...God said...“Be fruitful and multiply...”*

Psalms 127:3–5 (ESV) *“...children are a heritage from the Lord...Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the children of one’s youth...Blessed is the man who fills his quiver with them!”*

Marriage is the proper place for sexual fulfillment:

Genesis 2:24–25 (ESV) says, *“...a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.”*

Proverbs 5 tells us, *“Drink water from your own well— ...share your love only with your wife. ¹⁷ You should reserve it for yourselves. Never share it with strangers...Rejoice in the wife of your youth...May you always be captivated by her love.”*

Big Idea: Believers honor God by keeping their vows to marriage and purity.

- Paul was writing to the Christians in Corinth to correct some problems and to answer some questions they had sent him.

- In chapter six Paul admonished them against sexual immorality.
- He taught that Jesus is Lord of both the soul and the body, so what we do with our bodies matters.
- He wrote: ¹⁸ *Flee from sexual immorality...*¹⁹ *...do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you...? You are not your own,*²⁰ *for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.*ⁱⁱ
- Some of the believers in Corinth went to the other extreme. They wondered, *“If sexual immorality is a problem then maybe everyone should be celibate; no sex at all, even in marriage. Or should everyone just remain single and celibate?”* They wrote to ask Paul about this.
- They also had another question about marriage: *“If I became a follower of Christ but my spouse remains an unbeliever, should we divorce?”*
- Let’s see what Paul had to say to them and to us about marriage.

1 Corinthians 7:1–13 (ESV)

7 Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: “It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.”² But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband.

- Let’s understand what Paul is saying in verse one. First, the wording is different between translations:
 - NKJV and NASB: *“...not to touch a woman.”*
 - ESV clarifies it: *“...not to have sexual relations with a woman.”*
- In some translations (ESV/NIV) there are quotation marks indicating that Paul is quoting what they asked. In others it reads as a statement.
- They may have asked, *“Is it more spiritual to stay single and celibate?”*
- In essence, Paul is saying there is nothing odd or wrong about someone remaining single and celibate. That can be a good thing – it was Paul’s situation. **Why is celibacy a challenge for most people?**
- Bible Knowledge Commentary: *“For an individual to try to maintain a celibate state apart from the enablement of God (cf. v. 7) would lead to immorality. For that reason Paul encouraged people to marry.”ⁱⁱⁱ*
- Sexual desire being what it is, Paul said, God provided monogamous marriage for sexual expression between one man and one woman for those who don’t have the “gift” of remaining celibate.
- Another point in verse two. **How does verse two speak to God’s position on polygamy and same-sex relationships?**
- Now Paul gets into delicate territory in his marriage counseling:

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 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.

- Aren't you glad you came to Sunday School ☺?
- **Are these verses an excuse for abuse by a demanding husband?**
- **Is Paul a "sexist pig" who is giving husbands a license to demand what they want whenever they want it? Why?** (By the way, it's not always the wife who has "headaches." This works in both directions.)
- I know Paul has a high view of wives because he also wrote these words to the church at Ephesus:

Ephesians 5:25 (ESV)

25 Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, (then in) 28 In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. 29 For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, 30 because we are members of his body.

Let's read verses three and four in the NLT:

³The husband should fulfill his wife's sexual needs, and the wife should fulfill her husband's needs. ⁴The wife gives authority over her body to her husband, and the husband gives authority over his body to his wife.^{IV}

- We see in the NLT translation, each spouse "*gives authority over*" his/her body. This is about mutual agreement between the spouses. It's about striving to please and fulfill the other spouse.
- Chuck Swindoll writes: "*A good marriage requires mutual unselfishness. It calls for grace to release rights and expect little in return.*"^V
- A deep discussion on this concept of mutual fulfillment in the marital bed is beyond the time we have or the competency of your teacher.
- Our study of these verses is simply a good starting point for a couple to assess where things are in this area of our marriage relationships.
- An additional thought: Romans chapter twelve is one of the best guides for how a Christian should live in this world. We think of it in regards to living within the church and society, but we would do well if some of the admonitions of Romans 12 hung in a frame in our bedrooms:

Romans 12:9–10 (NLT)

⁹Don't just pretend to love others. Really love them. Hate what is wrong. Hold tightly to what is good. ¹⁰Love each other with genuine affection, and take delight in honoring each other.

Romans 12:16a (NLT)

¹⁶Live in harmony with each other.

- **Other thoughts?**
- Here are Paul's final words on being single and celibate versus married and monogamous:

⁶ Now as a concession, not a command, I say this. [*“concession Paul is advising, not commanding, the Corinthians.”^{vi}]* ⁷ 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. ⁸ To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single, as I am. ⁹ But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion.

- Paul is not saying because of sexual desires a single person should marry the first person that comes along! If marriage is God’s will that single person should wait on Him to bring the right spouse.
- The Corinthian believers also asked about what to do when one spouse has followed Christ and the other is an unbeliever. Should they divorce?

¹⁰ To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband ¹¹ (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife. ¹² To the rest I say (I, 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. ¹³ If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him.

- Paul advises the believing spouse to stay in that marriage if at all possible. Later in verse 15 he does give some guidance on an unbelieving spouse abandoning the marriage. But, the best plan is staying together.
- Paul goes on to say that the believing spouse just might reach the unbelieving spouse for Christ by a loving example. As Peter wrote: *“...even if some do not obey the word, they may be won without a word ...when they see your respectful and pure conduct.”^{vii}*

So, What’s the Takeaway?

- Being single and celibate can be a good thing if God has given a person that gift. That was Paul’s own story.
- For most of us God’s will is to live within His beautiful design of a monogamous marriage between one man and one woman committed to each other for life.
- Paul gave some specific advice for husbands and wives to consider.
- When it comes to sexual fulfillment in marriage, the key is mutual fulfillment and mutual satisfaction.
- Warren Wiersbe has a great quote: *“Sexual love is a beautiful tool to build with, not a weapon to fight with.”* [Then he adds a strong statement] *“To refuse each other is to commit robbery and to invite Satan to tempt the partners to seek their satisfaction elsewhere.”^{viii}*
- Paul’s advice is not a license for bedroom conflict, but a blueprint for enjoying God’s gift of marital sex to the fullest. It’s not about hitting your spouse over the head with 1 Corinthians 7 to demand what you want.

- The key is found in what we saw in Romans 12:10, “*Love each other with genuine affection, and take delight in honoring each other.*”
- Paul also gave specific advice for marriages where one spouse becomes a believer and the other hasn’t: stay together if at all possible. God hates divorce and always desires a couple to try to work things out.
- So, what do we do with this text? It may apply to us where we are in our marriages right now. Maybe it’s a reminder that will help us prevent problems in the future. Perhaps it showed up today so we can be equipped to advise friends or adult children.
- Whatever the case, God put it in Paul’s letter and then into scripture so we would learn from it and benefit from it.
- The bottom line: Whether single or married, God has guidelines for a blessed life and they are always in the pages of scripture.

ⁱ Explore the Bible Adult Leader Guide – Lifeway 2018

ⁱⁱ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. (2016). (1 Co 6:18–20). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

ⁱⁱⁱ Lowery, D. K. (1985). 1 Corinthians. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 2, p. 517). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

^{iv} Tyndale House Publishers. (2013). *Holy Bible: New Living Translation* (1 Co 7:3–5). Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers.

^v Couples' Devotional Bible by Marriage Partnership Magazine (Creator)
Published December 1st 1994 by Zondervan Publishing Company

^{vi} Barry, J. D., Mangum, D., Brown, D. R., Heiser, M. S., Custis, M., Ritzema, E., ... Bomar, D. (2012, 2016). *Faithlife Study Bible* (1 Co 7:6). Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.

^{vii} *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. (2016). (1 Pe 3:1–2). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

^{viii} Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *The Bible exposition commentary* (Vol. 1, p. 591). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.