

**Pastor Jonna Bohigian**  
**To Those Married and Single**  
1 Corinthians 7

I'm sure you can imagine it. The hustle and bustle of the big city. The influx of ideas, cultures, and religions. The activity of ships and sailors coming in and going out. The sense that *this* was an important place.

Corinth was an *exciting* place to live, and the church resembled that excitement. Like the lively competition in the marketplace, the too church was competitive. One person followed Paul, another followed Peter, and still another followed Apollos. Some were rich and some were poor, and everyone knew who was who. The rich ate, drank, and got drunk, and the poor went away hungry. And their home lives had a *real mix* of expressions.

Corinth was a *problem* child for Paul. But like a good parent, Paul did not give up on them. He was unable to visit, so he wrote a letter, and this first letter was in response to two things: reports brought to Paul and the church's letter to Paul.

This morning, we explore a difficult section of his first letter, which we know as chapter 7. It is difficult for two main reasons: 1. It was written in response to their letter and 2. It concerns a matter that the church currently struggles with.

Let's begin with the first problem: It was written in response to their letter. The difficulty in understanding a response is that we are only reading one half of the conversation. It's like overhearing a phone conversation. We overhear the tone of the conversation and one *half* of the conversation. We can put pieces together, but we are not privy to the entire conversation. And so we do our best to fill in the

blanks. As Christians who take seriously God's word, we utilize the best scholarship we can find.

I invite you to open your Bibles to 1 Corinthians chapter 7. In the first verse, it says, "Now for the matters you *wrote* about: It is not good for a man to marry." Perhaps you see a footnote by this verse, which offers the more literal translation, "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman."<sup>1</sup>

Why would the Corinthian Church have written that it is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman? Theologian Gordon Fee suggests that this statement is evidence of "eschatological women." Eschatological women believed that they had "already realized the 'resurrection from the dead' by being 'in spirit' and thus already as the angels, neither marrying nor giving in marriage."<sup>2</sup> In short, their belief was that they were *above* their bodies and *above* marriage. Their bodies were a part of the base things of this world, and the goal was to be spiritual, *above* the things of this world. In their minds, to be spiritual meant to be celibate and unmarried. As a result, people were encouraged *not* to marry and even to dissolve their marriages.

This of course was not representative of the entire church, because we read in other parts of Paul's letter to flee sexual immorality. Paul writes in chapter 5 that it has been reported that there is sexual immorality in the church, and that one man is even sleeping with his *stepmother*! Some in Corinth are over-sexed and others want to see sex completely removed from the church.

---

<sup>1</sup> Gordon Fee, *1 Corinthians*, 302.

<sup>2</sup> Fee, 299.

Let's continue with chapter 7. Paul writes, "Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: 'It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.' But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband."

With the encouragement not to get married and not to have sex even *in* marriage, some partners are seeking out prostitutes, and this is resolving nothing – in fact, creating *more* problems. It is better for Christians to be married than sexually immoral.

He continues in verse 3, "The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband." In other words, husbands should have sex with their wives and wives should have sex with their husbands. Why? "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" (1 Cor 7:4).

Paul here refers to a unity, a *belonging* in marriage. In marriage, we become *one* with our spouse; we *belong* to one another. As Jesus says in Mark, "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate" (Mk 10:7 – 9).

When Alek and I were going through premarital counseling, our counselor told us to "leave and cleave." We thought this was so funny, so we would tease one another, "Cleave!" We thought this was funny, but also a helpful reminder that our new spouse would be our *first* priority – above any other relationship, even above the rest of our family.

For us, what Paul reminds us of marriage is not an easy message. It may *seem* easy when we hear it at our marriage ceremony and get that fuzzy feeling. We are on board when life is beginning, when it is *exciting*. But we quickly forget the words that are spoken over us, that we are united and that we are now one flesh. Pretty soon, it becomes, "I'm not in the mood. I've got too many other things to do." And the other half feels rejected and begins to isolate.

This is why Paul says not to deprive one another. Except perhaps when both husband and wife agree and for a limited time and for the purpose of prayer. But even then, quickly come back together again, so that you may not be tempted by Satan.

Paul himself is celibate, but he does *not* say that celibacy is spiritually better than marriage. In verse 6, he says that everyone has their own gift from God. Some receive the gift of celibacy and others the gift of marriage. *Both* gifts are good.

In the church today, reactions to marriage and celibacy depend on their contexts. In the Catholic Church, if a man is unmarried when he becomes a priest, he is not permitted to marry. *Celibacy* is the ideal. For Protestants, *marriage* seems to be the ideal. Single pastors are often viewed with suspicion, especially if the pastor is male. Someone I know once said that he was in seminary and about to become a pastor, and felt *desperate* to find a wife. He wanted to have a future as a pastor, and was convinced that the only way he could do this was to be married.

But Paul does not say that either marriage or celibacy is the spiritual ideal. *Both* are gifts from God, and *both* are good.

Paul then addresses 3 different groups of people: those who are single, those who are married to another Christian, and those who are married to an unbeliever. To 2 of the groups, he offers his advice, but to 1 group, he says that his message is from God.

To those who are single, he encourages to be like him, single and celibate. But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry (1 Cor 7:9).

This is pretty good advice. Be satisfied being single. And if you can't be satisfied, get hitched!

If only life were so easy for us. "Just go and get a husband. Just go and get a wife." It can be a very painful thing, to desire to be married and yet to be single. A friend once told me that it was too painful to pray for a spouse any longer. She feared that God might never bring her a spouse. She could no longer pray, but she said that *I* could for her.

To those who are single and satisfied, I encourage you that you have received a gift, and perhaps you have even received the gift of celibacy. What a unique gift you have, to be married to the Lord and to serve in a way that you could not if you were married.

To those who are single and wish they were not, I encourage you to be content until God has placed the right person in your life. His perfect timing cannot be sped up, but His timing is purposeful. I cannot tell you why you are waiting, but I encourage you to pray. And if you cannot pray, ask others to pray *for* you.

Paul then addresses the second group: those who are married to another Christian. He says that *this* charge is from the Lord and not from him. "A wife must

not separate from her husband. But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife.”<sup>3</sup> For marriages where both are believers, divorce is to be avoided. “For believers, marriage is permanent, from its inception until the decease of one of the partners.”<sup>4</sup>

Remember, Paul was addressing those desiring to dissolve their marriages to be more spiritual. He here does not have in mind matters of abuse. Please speak with someone if you are experiencing abuse.

This is not an easy message. I recognize that some of you are hearing this with pain. No one seeks marriage in order to get divorced. No one’s *intention* is divorce, yet we see it frequently. As much as we try to console our friends that we are glad that they are no longer in the pain of their marriage, we recognize that they are now in the pain of divorce. No one *wants* to be a divorced person. And who wants to speak about divorce? But the church is *remiss* if we do not speak about divorce, because Scripture is clear that in marriage, two become one, and if possible, the Christian couple is encouraged *not* to seek to dissolve their marriage. 2 Corinthians 5:18 says that God has reconciled us to Himself in Christ, and we have been given the ministry of reconciliation. “In the Christian community, reconciliation is [to be] the norm.”<sup>5</sup>

To those who are married to a Christian spouse, I encourage you *not* to divorce but to build up your marriage as much as it depends on you. Seek godly

---

<sup>3</sup> Fee, 322.

<sup>4</sup> Fee, 327.

<sup>5</sup> Fee, 328.

counsel. Care for your husband, support your wife, pray for them, love them, and if at all possible, be reconciled.

Paul then speaks to a third group: those who are married to an unbeliever. He encourages the believing spouse *not* to divorce. God only knows, but the unbeliever may *believe* because of their marriage. Part of the call of the Christian *may be* to win their spouse for Christ. Their *children* may also become believers. If, however, the unbelieving spouse separates, let them, Paul says.

To those who are married to an unbelieving spouse, I encourage you that as much as it depends on you, remain at peace with your spouse. It is inherently more difficult to move forward when you are pulling in a different direction, but don't give up. Pray for your spouse and pray for your children.

Like I said, this chapter is not easy. 1. Because the situation to which Paul was responding is not entirely clear and 2. Because many of our marriages and our single lives are fractured. We need healing. And we need *hope*. We need hope in our singleness and hope in our marriages. We need hope that God can redeem the brokenness of our past and the brokenness of our present. We need hope that God is at work in our lives.

In Scripture, we are not promised that God will make our lives easy or that He will fix everything. But we are promised that because Jesus died and rose again, God is with us, and His Spirit is alive and active in ways that we cannot yet see. We are assured that life is more than our feeble efforts because God hears our prayers, He knows our hearts, and He loves us.

Lutheran theologian, Jim Nestingen, shared this story. Years ago, he pastored a congregation, where he came to know a woman who was a faithful believer and attended worship services every week. She diligently tried to convert her husband. For 24 years, she had every pastor of the church visit her husband. And yet, every Sunday, as she went to worship, Raymond went to hunt bobcats. One day, the doctors discovered cancer behind his eye.

Jim visited Raymond and told him a parable about the laborers in the vineyard from Matthew 20. He said, "Raymond, do you know what this means?" He said, "Well, it sounds to me that you can get in late." He asked to be baptized the next day. Jim came to know Raymond as a man of incredible faith. Jim later moved to another parish, and Raymond lived for another couple decades. The pastor who presided over his funeral told Jim, "He died in faith as serene as I've ever seen in my whole life!"

How could this be?! How could this man, who was visited by pastors for decades and had a wife who faithfully prayed for him for 24 years, suddenly come to know the Lord? We don't know. This is the mystery of faith and the mystery of how the Spirit moves. We can't control or manipulate God's Spirit, but we pray and we trust that regardless of our circumstance, God is faithful and He hears us.

And so church, in whatever situation you find yourself, be faithful, whether you are married or single. God is at work to fulfill His good purposes in your life. "He who calls you *is* faithful" (1 Thess 5:24a). Amen.