

Marriage & Singleness: A Series in 1 Corinthians 7
“The Goodness of Marriage and Sex Within” (1 Corinthians 7:1-7)

Preached by Minister Jason Tarn at HCC on 4/28/2013

Introduction

- ❖ This morning we’re starting a new series on marriage and singleness out of 1 Corinthians 7. We’ll be addressing mature topics, so I want to begin by giving parents with kids in the congregation a heads up. Now I hope you’re already talking about these things with your kids even at a young age. I hope you’re the first person to talk to them about sex. Because if you’re not the first, then who knows who will be and what they will say?
 - ▶ Now if you haven’t initiated these conversations, and you still want to be the first voice on this subject for your kids, then while I pray, please feel free to take them on over to our children’s program. **[PRAY]**

- ❖ This morning you’re going to hear a sermon on sex and marriage. I’m curious as to what you’re thinking. I imagine some of you are thinking, “Great!” Other are thinking, “Great.”
 - ▶ Some of you are excited because you grew up in an environment (in the home or in the church) where no one mentioned sex. The message you received was, “*Sex is dirty. Sex is shameful. We don’t talk about sex.*” So the two most important God-given authorities in your childhood, your parents and your church, were silent on sex. It was taboo. So they never helped you develop a Christian view and attitude towards it.

- ❖ But some of you experienced the opposite. You grew up with parental and church authorities who were not afraid to broach the subject. They talked to you about sex – all the time. And the message you received was, “*Sex is dangerous. You’ll get a disease. You’ll get pregnant. You’ll get someone pregnant. Don’t do it. Just say no.*” So here you show up to yet another sermon on sex. Is this preacher going to tell us how dangerous it is and how guilty we all are?

- ❖ Well this morning I do plan on broaching the subject. I don’t want the church to be silent on a topic that our culture speaks into 24/7. But for those of you weary of another sermon on sex, I hope to surprise you. **Today I’m going to talk about the goodness of sex.** Yes, it can be dangerous. Yes, it can be dirty and shameful. But those are perversions of sex, distortions of a gracious gift of God that is good – very good – when properly enjoyed.
 - ▶ I want to lay out a Christian worldview on sex. I want to show you the basic principles behind a Christian understanding of sex, which are in today’s passage.

- ❖ First off, we see that Paul was responding to two perspectives on sex common in his day. Besides the Christian view, there were two other dominate views. First, you had Plato. You had his philosophy that said, “*The body is bad, the soul is good. Sex is of the body so it’s inherently bad. It’s dirty. It’s to be avoided.*” Even today we have the term ‘platonic’, as in platonic relationship, a sexless relationship. That was **the platonic view**.
 - ▶ But then there was **the pagan view**. In Greco-Roman culture, pagan religions were saying, “*Sex is a god. Sex is something to worship, something to live for. Sex has a kind of divine status in your life.*” So they worshiped Aphrodite or Eros. Temple prostitution was also common, where the sex act was seen as a means of worship. Paul actually mentions this practice earlier in chapter 6:15-16. So far from making nothing of sex like the platonists, the pagans made it everything.

- ❖ So these were the dominate views in Paul’s day, and it’s no surprise they’re still around. People today tend to fall under one of two categories when it comes to sex. **We’re either prudes or we’re pagans. We either degrade sex and call it gross OR we deify it and call it god.** We either try to avoid it altogether, or we let it rule our lives.
 - ▶ My goal is to present, from our text, a Christian understanding of sex that neither degrades nor deifies – but rather designates it as a gift from God to be given and enjoyed within the context of marriage. I have three points: 1) Sex is not gross. 2) Sex is not god. 3) Sex is gift.

Sex is Not Gross

- ❖ First, sex is not gross. Paul is going to confront and challenge the prude. Chapter 7 is his response to the prudish, platonic view of sex. Look at v1, *“Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: “It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.””*
 - ▶ So a previous letter was written to Paul where the Corinthians raised a number of issues to which he responds starting in chapter 7. The words *“now concerning”* indicate that he’s replying to a matter they brought up (cf. 7:25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1, 12).
- ❖ Don’t get the impression that the Corinthians were just looking for spiritual advice from a mentor. Rather, if you consider the context – recalling how Paul spent the first four chapters having to defend his apostolic ministry – it suggests the Corinthians weren’t so much asking Paul’s opinion on these issues but asserting their own. They weren’t asking, *“Can we?”* but rather, *“Why can’t we?”*
 - ▶ But their views were contrary to what Paul originally taught them, so he writes to either qualify or outright correct. Just look at chapter 6:12. The Corinthians were using slogans like *“All things are lawful for me,”* to justify certain behaviors. Now there was some truth in that statement, but it needed to be carefully qualified. That’s why Paul adds, *“but not all things are helpful. “All things are lawful for me,” but I will not be enslaved by anything.”*
 - Similarly in chapter 7:1, Paul mentions another slogan they were using: *“It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.”* And in vv2-16, he gives one big, nuanced qualifier. He’s going to challenge and correct their thinking, without completely rejecting it.
- ❖ Let’s consider their slogan. That phrase *“it is good”* was probably used by the Corinthians in the sense of being desirable or advantageous. **So they're suggesting it is to your advantage, your spiritual advantage, to not have sexual relations with anyone even your spouse.**
 - ▶ This point of view was not just promoting abstinence as a healthy ideal, as a means to avoid a transmittable disease or an unwanted pregnancy. No, it was promoting abstinence as an **ascetic ideal**, where the celibate life was considered the spiritual life.
- ❖ Earlier in chapters 2-3, we learn that the Corinthians considered themselves “spiritual people” (2:14-3:1). And as ‘spiritual’ Christians, they considered themselves superior to ‘worldly’ ones who still participated in ‘worldly’ things like marriage and sex.

- ▶ Marriage and sex belong to this present age which is passing away. One day, according to Jesus, we won't be given in marriage, instead we'll be like angels in heaven (Mk. 12:25). So why participate in these things any longer?
- ❖ This kind of thinking resulted in even married Christians abstaining from sexual relations, assuming that made them more spiritual. Some were even contemplating separation or divorce to better avoid sex, which is why Paul takes up the subject in vv10-16.
 - ▶ **All of this stemmed from a platonic view that degraded sex, that saw it as gross, that elevated those who can abstain from it to a higher level of spirituality.** And sadly this is the view that many of us grew up with in the church.
- ❖ But here in vv2-3 Paul qualifies and corrects. "*But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband.*"
 - ▶ Later in v7 he'll agree that never having sex is good, but only if you've received the gift of celibacy like him. It's *not* good if you're married. Paul is saying a husband and wife *should not* abstain from sexual relations. Instead they should "*have*" each other, which was a common euphemism for sex (1 Cor. 5:1; 7:29).
- ❖ Paul is pushing for monogamous marriages where each believer is regularly having sexual relations with his *own* wife or her *own* husband – where abstinence from sex is the exception and not the norm (v5).
 - ▶ **Far from degrading sex or just permitting it, Paul is actually commanding it!** This slogan does not apply to married persons. A regular, not-infrequent sex life is the biblical norm for Christian couples.
- ❖ If you think abstaining from sex with your spouse will make you more spiritual and draw you closer to God, you're mistaken. It's not only biblically disobedient but spiritually dangerous.
 - ▶ Notice Paul's reason in v2 for why spouses should regularly *have* each other, "*because of the temptation to sexual immorality*". Now I'm sure he could've said more. Scripture teaches other purposes for sex. **Procreation** being chief among them.
- ❖ **Pleasure** is another biblical purpose. Sex is for pleasure. Who would've guessed? For some reason Christians wouldn't, or at least we're uncomfortable saying it. Yet there is a whole book in the Bible called the **Song of Solomon** that celebrates sexual pleasure between husband and wife. We have **Proverbs 5:18-19** commanding a man to rejoice in his wife and to "*let her breasts fill you at all times with delight; be intoxicated always in her love.*"
 - ▶ If that made you squeamish, it just goes to show how much the platonic view of sex as shaped your thinking. Sex in marriage is for pleasure. Nothing wrong with that.

- ❖ But here Paul mentions another purpose for marital sex besides procreation or pleasure. He mentions **protection** (spiritual protection). Probably because it was most pressing at the time.
 - ▶ The context, specifically chapter 6:15-16, suggests that the sexual immorality he had in mind was temple prostitution. *Could it be that some of these husbands being deprived of sexual relations were going to prostitutes to fulfill their sexual desires?*
 - Rather than being an ascetic ideal that brings married persons closer to God, sexual abstinence makes them more vulnerable to Satan and temptation. Later in v5 Paul advises couples not to abstain from sex for very long, so that you don't put your spouse in the Tempter's line of sight.

- ❖ **So Paul's point is that husbands and wives should pursue sexual intimacy, not just to please each other, but to protect each other.** If you and your spouse are only intimate for the purpose of bearing children, then you're diminishing the role of sex in your marriage and perhaps even making one or both partners more susceptible to sexual temptation.
 - ▶ Now I realize that when a couple is experiencing sexual frustration in their marriage, it's rarely attributable to one cause. There are usually layers of causes. But perhaps a reason why sex is far too infrequent is because you have too low a view of sex. You've always considered it a bit dirty and somewhat shameful. And unfortunately, you've carried that mentality into your marriage bed.
 - I hope these words from Paul are liberating for you. His point is that sex is not gross. Sex is good and it's good for marriage.

Sex is Not God

- ❖ So first, sex is not gross. Second, sex is not god. **Christians should not degrade sex like a prude, but neither should we deify it like a pagan.** But that's what we do. We go from one extreme to the other. Some of you had a prudish upbringing. You were raised with a platonic view, but at some point, in adolescence or in college, you reacted, perhaps overreacted.
 - ▶ You turned sex into a god, an idol in your life. Sex became everything. It was always on your mind. It functioned like a god to you. It shaped and controlled your decisions. It gave meaning to your relationships. Do you see what I mean by deifying sex?

- ❖ The culture we live in is only encouraging this. **It keeps sending a message that sex is nothing to be ashamed about.** Sex is like hunger or any other good and natural appetite. If you feel hungry, you eat. If you feel sexy, you sex.
 - ▶ And just as you wouldn't eat one dish for the rest of your life, it's not natural to have only one sex partner for the rest of your life. Our culture says having lots of sex with lots of partners is natural. Sex is nothing to be ashamed about.

- ❖ Now if all they mean is that sex is not gross, that it was designed for procreation, for pleasure, for protection – then Christianity would agree. But that's not what's meant when people say sex is nothing to be ashamed about.

- ▶ **It typically means no one should be ashamed at the extent to which our sexual appetite has disproportionately grown.** It's grown way beyond our need. C.S. Lewis used to argue that if our appetite for food grew equal to our appetite for sex, we'd be locked up in an asylum.
 - He says imagine a planet where people pay money to watch someone eat a mutton chop or a slab of bacon, where people ogle magazine pictures of food. If we visited such a planet, we would think the appetite of these people was seriously messed up.¹

- ❖ But that's what we do with sex. **It's no longer just a thing we desire. It becomes everything. It dominates our desires.** As I've been stressing, sex is not evil. It's not bad. But it can be evil, it can be bad, if our appetite for sex is inordinate. If it's disproportionate to our need.
 - ▶ John Calvin used to say, "*The evil does not usually lie in what we want but that we want it too much.*" That's when a good thing turns into an idol, into a god. That's what we've done to sex.

- ❖ But here in v7 Paul challenges the pagan's view. The pagan says, "I need sex. I can't live without it. If I never have sex, I'll feel unfulfilled. I'll feel less than human."
 - ▶ To that Paul responds, "*I wish that all were as I myself am.*" By that he meant someone with the gift of celibacy. He didn't just mean 'single' because there are plenty of single people who want to get married and have sex. But if you have the gift of celibacy (like Paul), you're free of the desire for sex or marriage.
 - Now unlike those in the Corinthian church trying to impose the gift of celibacy on all (even the married), Paul goes on to stress that it's a "*gift from God*" and not something you can require of all.

- ❖ But the very fact that God does give this gift to some people – the gift of not needing sex or marriage – proves to the pagan that sex is not everything. **You don't need sex to be fulfilled. You don't need sex to be fully human.**
 - ▶ In fact, the most human human-being who walked the face of this earth never had sex and never married. Jesus is called the "*last Adam*" (1 Cor. 15:45). He's the last man, the final man, man *par excellence*, man as he was intended to be. Jesus was the most human human ever. And he never had sex.

- ❖ Single people, our culture is going to tell you that you need sex. That abstaining from it is unnatural. That it's unhealthy. That it's no different than starving yourself.
 - ▶ But Christianity says, "Look, don't despise sex. God designed it." We also say, "Don't deify sex. It doesn't make you a more fulfilled human being. It shouldn't shape your identity." A Christian is not a prude or a pagan.

¹ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, Book 3, Chapter 5.

Sex is Gift

- ❖ A Christian is different and views sex differently. We don't degrade it or deify it. Rather we designate sex as a good gift from God to be given and enjoyed between husband and wife.
 - ▶ Sex is not gross. Sex is not god. Sex is gift. In the Garden, in Genesis 2 (before chapter three and the Fall of Man), God institutes marriage and gives sex as a gift to the first husband and wife. This is all before sin enters the picture.
 - **Genesis 2:24** says, *“Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.”* **In other words, marriage is a joining of two people in such a profound way that they virtually become a new, distinct person.** Two become one.

- ❖ I tell couples when they make their vows before God and witnesses that a miracle takes place. In that moment, they enter into a covenant where God takes two separate individuals and unites them into one person – spiritually, emotionally, socially, economically, legally.
 - ▶ **And sex physically consummates marriage because it is the one act that most clearly communicates this oneness between husband and wife.** Tim Keller says, *“Sex is God’s appointed way for two people to reciprocally say to one another, “I belong completely, permanently, and exclusively to you.”*²
 - And every sex act after that initial consummation is an ongoing affirmation and nurturing of your unique covenant union.

- ❖ This means sex is not just a way to physically express your love for someone. **Sex is the way a married couple affirms their oneness and renews their covenant commitments.** It's popular these days for couples, when they hit a milestone anniversary, to put on a renewal ceremony where they publicly renew their marriage vows. The fact is that **every sex act between a husband and wife is a private renewal ceremony.** That's what's happening.
 - ▶ In the act of sex you communicate to each other, "I belong completely, permanently, and exclusively to you." You stand before each other naked and unashamed, and I don't just mean physically bare but emotionally and relationally. Your spouse sees you with all your imperfections and yet chooses to love you and accept you. That's the beauty of sex in marriage. That's what it's for.

- ❖ This is why Christianity insists that sex is only to be had in the context of marriage. **If you're having sex with anyone but the person you're married to, you're lying.** Your actions are saying, "I belong completely, permanently, and exclusively to you", but that's not true. Until you're married, you don't share that unique oneness. Not even if he's your true love or if she's your fiancé. You're not one until God makes it happen. Until he makes two into one.

- ❖ My point is that God is the one who marries a couple and gives sex as a gift that they in turn give to each other. It's a gift, but in fact Paul uses even stronger language in vv3-4.

² Tim Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 224.

- ❖ *“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.”*
 - ▶ According to Paul, the gift a husband gives to his wife is actually her right, her “*conjugal rights*”. He is talking about giving what the other is due. In other words, the husband owes sex to his wife and likewise the wife to her husband.

- ❖ A verse like this really offends people. The prude can’t reconcile how Scripture can speak of sex as a husband or wife’s right. They’re offended and so is the pagan. To the pagan, talk of conjugal rights is such a demeaning, antiquated way to speak of sex. Sex is not a duty! Sex is supposed to be liberating and free!

- ❖ But it’s important that we read this kind of duty-language in its context, in light of v5, where apparently some spouses were actually depriving their partners of sex. So granted, talk of duty and rights is not the only way to define sex, but in this case, it was necessary. But it’s not so much an emphasis on, “You owe me” but rather, “I owe you”. **You’re not demanding sex from your spouse. You’re recognizing your responsibility and privilege to give it.**
 - ▶ And in v4, the emphasis is not so much on your authority over your spouse’s body to do whatever you please, but on the fact that, in marriage, I don’t have unilateral authority over my body to do whatever I please. So I shouldn’t deprive my spouse of sexual relations simply because it pleases me to abstain.
 - **The stress here is on the mutuality of sex in marriage.** The fact that Paul begins by stressing the wife’s conjugal rights is amazing! Greco-Roman culture was strictly patriarchal. Husbands/fathers ruled their homes like kings. Wives didn’t have rights! Sex was the husband’s privilege and the wife’s duty.

- ❖ But not so in the Christian home. **In the Christian home and Christian marriage bed, there is total mutuality.** There is reciprocal love and reciprocal duty. Both husband and wife are considering the other's needs and the other's rights over their own. Both are trying to outdo one another in showing honor (Rom. 12:10).
 - ▶ **Marriage is a back-and-forth dance of love between husband and wife where they’re constantly laying down their rights and privileges and daily seeking to outdo each other – not in what they can get – but in what they can give.**
 - If that is the attitude towards sex that a husband and wife bring into their marriage bed, then he never has to worry about her being insensitive or inconsiderate to his sexual desires. And she never has to worry about him making sexual demands that make her uncomfortable.

- ❖ *Do you see how this could transform marriages?* Sex (or the lack thereof) is one of the biggest contributors to marital stress. And the root of the problem is selfishness. Because of our sinfulness, we’re prone to simply serve our own pleasure. But God in his grace, through the death and resurrection of his Son, redeems us from our sinfulness, setting us free from a slavery to self and self-pleasure.

- ❖ And to a good many, God graciously gives the gift of marriage and sex within. The word Paul uses for "gift" in v7 is the word *charisma*, which literally means a gift of grace. Paul uses the same word later in chapter 12 to describe what we commonly call spiritual gifts.
 - ▶ **The point is that sex in marriage is a gift we receive by grace from the Spirit, and likewise it is a gift we give to our spouses with the same grace – seeking mainly to please the other.**
 - She wants to please him, and so her joy is to give what he desires. He wants to please her, and so his joy is not to demand what she finds unpleasant to give. This is what mutuality looks like in the marriage bed.

- ❖ **And that also means if a husband and wife do abstain from sexual relations, it has to be a mutual decision.** Look at v5, *“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.”* Notice how there are two conditions: 1) The abstinence is agreed upon, and 2) The abstinence is temporary.

- ❖ And in case someone tries to twist Paul’s words and make this practice of abstaining for the sake of prayer an expectation or requirement in Christian marriages, he writes in v6 that he says this *“as a concession, not a command.”*
 - ▶ Married couples are not required to deprive themselves of sex every so often for the purpose of prayer. Paul is not commanding this. He's just conceding this if a couple wants to, provided it's only for a limited amount of time.

- ❖ ***Do you see how Paul is continuing to challenge both prude and pagan and their views of sex?*** Sex is not gross. It's good and right to be shared and enjoyed in marriage. There are very few reasons why a married couple should ever deprive each other sex, and if they do, it better be for a noble task like prayer.
 - ▶ But sex is not god either. It's not everything in marriage. It's just one thing, one gift, you can give to your spouse to affirm and deepen your covenant oneness.

Conclusion

- ❖ I hope this has been both a challenging and refreshing way to begin our series through 1 Corinthians 7. Now next Sunday, we're going to go deeper on the subject of marriage, and I think it would be a shame if I didn't speak into the most talked about social issue of our day, same-sex marriage.
 - ▶ So as we continue to lay out the Christian understanding of sex and marriage, we'll try to answer why same-sex sex and same-sex marriage fails to communicate the same message.