

Sermon prepared on 1 Corinthians 7:1-16 for Grace Church by Jonathan Shradar

This week we dive back into 1 Corinthians and what is a definition of marriage, of how it works, what it is for. This topic is possibly the only thing that has more opinions than our impending election. So we can go many places to get a perspective on marriage... We can catch the drift of how it is portrayed in media and entertainment. We can put an endless supply of books on our reading list (200K on Amazon). We can talk to family members with many years of experience to get a sense of what marriage is practically for, for how it works.

In all those sources we are likely to find some advice that resonates with us personally but which one is the authority, who has it right? Other voices say the individual is the only one that is right and we should be allowed to redefine marriage to suit our needs.

For the Christian however we have a trusted source to go to, what is meant to be authority in our lives, the Word of God, where some think it is antiquated, we see it as the blueprint for all of life that reveals what marriage is truly about, how it is meant to work.

We see elements of this in our text today and as we hear a practical answer to an important question, we can more fully understand that:

The poetic and practical realities of marriage are meant to reveal Christ and his empowering love.

1 Corinthians 7:1-16

We have been trucking along in our study of this letter from the Apostle Paul to the church in Corinth. This letter that is actually part of an ongoing dialogue between the Apostle and the church. Many issues have already been wrestled with and we haven't even made it halfway through the book!

Paul now moves from issues he has heard about from others to the topics the church was asking for answers on. This is what we call an occasional letter - there is an occasion for it, it speaks to a specific need, or time in the church. By no means does that mean it is out-of-date for us but that we must be careful to know the context of the writing to rightly hear the truths proclaimed.

Two categories then will be our path this morning, first the Occasion, what is Paul addressing and why, then the Answer that he gives.

1) The Occasion

We have already seen in our study of 1 Corinthians that the city in which the church resides is not known for its upright morality. In fact quite the opposite as its reputation was one full of

unique relational definitions and a vast army of temple prostitutes making pleasure and self-indulgence just a proposition away.

Marriage in the culture of the day was about carrying on the family name, procreation (having children), patriarchal society where women and even one's wife were mere instruments, a means to an end, to the needs of the man - mostly physical, sexual needs.

Just in chapter 6 Paul reminds the church of the deep covenant realities of the most intimate of human relational acts. "The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord..." Flee it. It is not a call to all people in Corinth but to the church, to those that believe in Christ and realize that they have been freed from the narrative of self-indulgence that was all around them.

It is in this context then that the church has seemed to respond in unhealthy ways. Given the context of immorality, the church has overcorrected and claimed that since sex must be bad it should be avoided.

And in setting up the questions, Paul quotes from their letter to him.

7:1 "Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman."

The church was fleeing immorality - at least preaching about it - with such voracity that they had moved into asceticism (severe self-discipline and avoidance of all forms of indulgence). Here it takes the form of calling for abstinence across the board, even in marriage. As if one book was written that was bad and we said no one should read any book.

Today, we understand the context but we don't get much of the overcorrection. We live in an environment that would not be far off from the perspective of unbelieving Corinth. All of life as pursuit of personal whims and indulgence. We may not have temple prostitutes, but many prostitute themselves to whichever perspective makes the strongest claims of fulfillment and promises to meet their needs. Marriage becomes not an institution but a mere instrument, a means to an end.

In the church then, instead of overcorrecting and saying "if marriage has been redefined to be no good - we shouldn't have marriages..." Instead of that posture there is a weird neglect of what marriage is meant for and more of a rally point of elevating marriage to the untouchable icon - the bedrock of humanity... which is really falling into the norms and current of the culture. Left to wonder what marriage is really meant for and how we can practically live as married people.

This is the question that Paul is answering and in doing so he calls the believer to a reclamation of marriage that will be starkly different from the culture around them.

2) The Answer

7:1-2 “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.”

Marriage is not the ideal, but when Christians are married it should be ideal.

Paul goes on to be very practical, speaking of singleness, to divorce, marriages between believers and nonbelievers. But the practical answer he gives is in light of the poetic reality of marriage that has come before in Scripture and that is reclaimed in Christ.

Genesis 2:18-25 “Then the LORD God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.” Now out of the ground the LORD God had formed every beast of the field and every bird of the heavens and brought them to the man to see what he would call them. And whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all livestock and to the birds of the heavens and to every beast of the field. But for Adam there was not found a helper fit for him. So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said,

“This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.”

Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.”

This one flesh union reveals God’s cares for his beloved, and that is exactly what it is meant to do. In the perfection of the garden there is no shame, no loneliness, just knowledge of how good God was to them.

The perfect marriage doesn’t last long. The fall, a rebellious act and corruption, brokenness enter the picture. Almost immediately in the narrative of human history then you see marriage being redefined and abused - polygamy, perversion... it is as if the poetry of marriage had been robbed.

Then the true revelation of God’s care for his people comes... Christ reclaims marriage.

Ephesians 5:1 “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God...” “[22] Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. [23] 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. [24] Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.

[25] Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, [26] that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, [27] 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. [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. [31] “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” [32] This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. [33] However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.”

It is very poetic language to say that marriage is meant to reveal Christ and his love for the church - to be an image of something more than itself. This is the biblical context in which Paul can speak on the issue with the church. In often confounding ways, how we relate to one another in marriage makes a case for the gospel, for the good news of Jesus and his claim over those in need of salvation. If marriage has poetic realities it also has practical realities that we can live toward.

“If the institution of marriage is about a greater marriage, then it is vital to get the instructions for how marriage works from the reality that Christians are being called to image and reflect.”

That is exactly what Paul gives in response - he says that essentially in light of Christ marriage has three key marks; mutuality, permanence and sanctity.

Using this question on sex in marriage, Paul lays out that not only is it purposeful but it is meant to be a way in which marriage is mutual, it is all in from both the husband and the wife’s perspective. Both are to serve and give over all of themselves in covenant with each other. And there is no way in which you can give more of yourself than in marital physical intimacy.

“It is the privilege and duty of both together. Each belongs mutually to the other. In sexual intercourse, as nowhere else, husbands and wives symbolically express both their unity and mutuality.”

Sex is not used to manipulate your spouse, as a negotiating chip, it is cherished for the mutual joy and care of husband and wife. Kids are a great outcome of it, but Paul doesn’t mention procreation here, he talks of not depriving one another of each other in marriage. The husband has care and control over the wife’s body and the wife has care and control over the husband’s body.

And decisions of when are made together; couples may even abstain for a time to devote themselves to other important mutual endeavors, like prayer.

To the patriarchal society this would have been scandalous, that a woman should have such authority in marriage, but that is exactly what Paul says of Christians. The cultural norms won’t

do, marriages are to be mutual, equalizing in duty, men and women with the same share of responsibility... Paul's emphasis is not on "You owe me," but on "I owe you."

Marriage is also to have a permanence about it. Wives should not separate and husbands should not divorce. This one is a hard one, for both first century Corinth and for us today. And I think it says something about how we think of Christ - here is a covenantal relationship designed by God to reveal, to hint at and show his redemptive love. And too often we make the case that it is better to just give up that persevere. Like Christ's unwavering fidelity to his bride, "The Lord gives this charge" that marriages last.

Pre-marriage counseling and one of the first questions: is this the person you want to fight for for the rest of your life. Because that is often what it will be...

"The commitment to marriage by a man and a woman is lifelong, underwritten by God himself and not to be loosened, let alone destroyed, by mere humans. 'What God has joined together, let not man put asunder.'"

For Paul this even extends to marriages that consist of one believer and a spouse not in the faith. If the unbelievers separates or end the marriage, the Christian is not bound but maybe that relationship will be used for the spouse's salvation.

So marriage has mutuality, permanence and then also sanctity.

We see this in how the unbelieving husband is "made holy because of his wife..." or how the children are clean because of the faith of one of their parents. Now this doesn't mean they have salvation but that their environment is one of sanctity, bringing them into contact with the Lord and his grace for them as revealed in the commitment of the believing parent or spouse.

Calvin comments, "The godliness of the one does more to "sanctify" the marriage than the ungodliness of the other to make it unclean."

In its sanctity there is also an increasing holiness that is worked out as Christian couples serve each other and avoid temptation. This is the primary reason for Paul's perspective on sex in marriage, do it, enjoy it, be mutually giving and receiving so that Satan may not tempt you because your lack of self-control. In marriages where intimacy is adversarial, not mutual, then we are prone to run after self and the lures of this world to get our fix...

"If true giving to each other in sexual intercourse is the essence of a union where God has joined two individuals together, then Satan will do his worst in inhibiting, spoiling, robbing it of its purity and its fulfilling potential. Satan is always active in a Christian marriage, to quench shared prayer and to reduce the joys of sex to his own, debased, level." David Prior
Marriages not only reveal Christ but help the Christian avoid immorality and sin.

This all paints the truth of Christ in living color. Here is the husband that has given all of himself, all of his physicality to his bride. Nothing is hidden and he is brilliantly bare before her - unashamed. He is the husband that is not going anywhere, his word of covenantal love is stronger than stone and lasts for eternity. And he doesn't leave his bride, the church, as she is, he transforms her, sanctifies her, washing her in the word and empowering her to live by his love.

This is what Christian marriage is meant for - it stands in stark contrast to the weakened institution of culture - it shows all those watching the goodness of Christ.

The poetic and practical realities of marriage are meant to reveal Christ and his empowering love.

There seems to be clear application from this text - clear direction!

If you are not a believer, watch the marriages of believers. See what they prioritize and sacrifice for one another. See Jesus in them.

Those that are single - the Word says it is good for you to be single and it is a gift just as marriage is a gift. We mess things up by prioritizing marriage, but 1 Corinthians calls each of us to a contentment in the season Christ has placed us.

It is also not bad to desire marriage - to have the help that marriage provides. But as George Whitefield preached, "Be married to Christ before you are married to any others."

For those that are married, live out the glorious implications of marriage for your joy and God's glory. Be about it, endeavor to come together in mutuality, commit to one another in permanence and behold the sanctity of the covenant you have with your spouse. "God made us so, sex is good. Within Christian marriage it is the most intimate celebration of life together in Christ."

In the practical things of marriage reclaim the poetic, image Christ and his love for you.

Hard to do... It still takes two. There could be medical or other realities that make it difficult. We will fail, we will put self above our spouse... but we have Christ. The One who has already accomplished marital faithfulness and care for us.

That truth is meant to change our perspective just enough to motivate us differently and empower us to live it out. When we see that Christ & the church are not the metaphor; They are the reality & our marriages are the metaphors... then we might experience the reclaimed goodness of marriage.

“God’s covenantal commitment to his people is steadfast, unflagging, unshakable. It is only when the church see herself for what she is (adulterous) [prone to temptation] that she will come to know the freedom of the grace of God. The radical grace of God to us is the source we need to be radically gracious to our spouse.”

Might our marriages and all of our relationships drip with this grace that others will see, and know the real Jesus.