

**1 Corinthians: A Letter to a Troubled Church**  
*A Healthy Marriage* (1 Corinthians 7:1-16)  
Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on March 12, 2023

**Introduction**

- ❖ If you've been worshipping with us long enough, you know our preferred practice here is to preach **expository sermons**. That's where the preacher doesn't approach his sermon prep by asking, "What do I want to preach this Sunday?," and then look for a text that supports the point he wants to make. Instead, a preacher committed to expository preaching will approach his sermon prep by asking, "What is my text and what is its main point?" And that's the point he wants to make in his sermon that Sunday. That's expository preaching.
  - **Now another preferred practice of ours is to preach through whole books of the Bible.** You see, if I commit to preach through a particular book, then I'm bound to touch on topics and issues that I wouldn't have chosen if it were purely up to me and my interests. In the end, that results in a healthier and more comprehensive pulpit ministry because Scripture's priorities lead the way – and not the preacher's.
  
- ❖ **I'm reminding you of our pulpit practices because, for two weeks in a row, you're going to hear a message about sex.** Not because it's a hobby horse at this church. But because we're committed to preaching the text. And our text, 1 Corinthians 7, talks about marriage and sex. Some of you are thinking, "GREAT!" Others are thinking, "great."
  - **Some of you are excited because you grew up in a home or in a church where no one talked about sex.** It was a taboo subject. The implicit message you received was that sex is dirty. It's shameful. We don't talk about it. So the two most important influences in your childhood – your parents and your church – were silent on sex. No one ever helped you develop a Christian view of it. So you welcome the subject!
  
- ❖ **But I'm sure there are others here who grew up with parents or churches who talked to you about sex – a lot.** And the message you got was, "*Sex is dangerous. You'll get a disease. You'll get pregnant. You'll get someone pregnant. So don't do it.*" And now you're going to hear yet another sermon on the subject. So you're bracing yourself.
  - For those of you weary of what we're going to say, I hope to surprise you. **Today, we're going to emphasize the goodness of sex and the part it plays in a healthy marriage.** It's true that sex can be dangerous. Yes, it can be dirty and shameful. But those are distortions of a gracious gift from God that is good when properly enjoyed.
  
- ❖ **In today's text, Paul is responding to distorted views of sex, which happened to be the two most dominate views in his day.** On one hand, you had a worldview shaped by Plato and his philosophy that said, "*The body is bad; the soul is good. Since sex is of the body, it's inherently bad. It's something to avoid.*" This is where we get the idea of a platonic relationship – a relationship with no sex. So that's **the platonic view**.
  - Then there's **the pagan view**. In Greco-Roman culture, pagan religions treated sex as god. Sex is something you worship. So they literally worshiped gods and goddesses of sex. Temple prostitution was also common in that culture. That's where worshippers would sleep with temple prostitutes as a means of worship. Paul mentioned this in last week's text (6:15-16). So far from making nothing of sex, like the platonists, the pagans made it everything.

- ❖ So these were the two dominate views of sex in Paul's day, and it's no surprise they're still quite common today. People today tend to fall under one of two categories. **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, or we let it rule our lives.
  - **My goal is to present a Christian understanding of sex that neither degrades it nor deifies it – but rather designates it as a gift from God to be given within the context of a healthy marriage.** I have three points: (1) Sex is not gross. (2) Sex is not God. (3) Sex is a gift.

### Sex is Not Gross

- ❖ First, sex is not gross. This text is going to confront the prude. Chapter 7 is going to challenge 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.””*
  - Apparently a letter was written by the Corinthians where they raised some issues to which Paul responds starting in chapter 7. But don't get the impression that they were seeking advice from a mentor. **In light of all we know about their deteriorating relationship, the Corinthians weren't asking for Paul's opinion but asserting their own.** They weren't asking, *“Can we?”* but rather, *“Why can't we?”*
    - Last week, we saw Paul challenge some of the theological slogans they were using to justify their behavior. Similarly, in v1, Paul mentions another slogan of theirs: *“It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.”* The rest of our text is his critique that outlook on sex and marriage.
- ❖ Let's consider that slogan. That phrase *“it is good”* was being used in the sense of it being desirable or advantageous. **They're suggesting it is to your advantage – to your spiritual advantage – to not have sexual relations with anyone. Not even your spouse.**
  - Remember that many of the Corinthians considered themselves to be *“spiritual people”* (2:14-3:1). They saw themselves as superior to those worldly Christians. Who are still of the flesh. Who still take part in worldly things like sex.
    - **To them, those fleshly desires and fleshly activities belong to this present age which is passing away.** Didn't Jesus say that, one day, we won't be given in marriage, but instead we'll be like angels in heaven? (Mk 12:25) So why participate in these worldly things any longer?
- ❖ **This kind of thinking was so pervasive in the Corinthian church that even married Christians were abstaining from sexual relations, assuming it made them more spiritual.** Some were even contemplating separation or divorce to make it easier to avoid their marriage bed, which explains why Paul takes up the subject of divorce in vv10-16.
  - Notice how he addresses wives first – not his normal practice – which suggests that wives were likely the ones who were initiating divorce. *“<sup>10</sup>To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband <sup>11</sup>(but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife.”*

- ❖ Those terms *separate* and *divorce* are synonymous. **They both refer to the dissolution of a marriage.** Perhaps the reason why Paul used ‘separate’ for a wife is because, in that culture, she would divorce by leaving her husband’s household. She would *separate* herself. It was never the husband who left the home. He would *send away* the wife, which is literally what the word divorce means in the Greek.
  - Now that parenthetical statement, “*(not I, but the Lord)*” is Paul’s way of indicating that this command did not originate from him – but from the Lord Jesus himself. From his teachings passed down. Like in Mark 10, where Jesus taught against divorce and for the permanence of marriage. So in line with Jesus, Paul does not permit divorce, particularly for those seeking to avoid their marriage beds.
  
- ❖ **Now in vv12-13, Paul shifts attention from a Christian marriage to a mixed-faith marriage between a Christian and a non-Christian.** Remember, these Corinthians were converted not too long ago, so it’s no surprise if some had spouses who were still unbelievers. But this created a new set of tensions. Based on Paul’s reply in v14 about the unbelieving spouse being “*made holy*” by the believing one, it’s likely that some were worried their one-flesh union with their unbelieving spouse was somehow defiling them.
  - So Paul writes vv12-13. “*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. If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him.*”
    - Now when you read, “*(I say, not the Lord)*,” it doesn’t mean Paul is merely giving his opinion on this matter. No, he’s still giving a command. Just not one based on a saying of Jesus. He’s not aware of Jesus ever addressing divorce in regards to mixed-faith marriages. That’s all he means.
  
- ❖ **Paul’s point is that – as long as it’s up to you – stay married.** Don’t be the one who initiates divorce. But Paul is realistic enough to know that sometimes the unbelieving spouse wants out. So he writes in v15, “*But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace.*”
  - Now there’s so much more we could say about divorce and remarriage, but I hope you see how this text is not primarily about those things. It’s primarily about one’s view of sex and how that relates to marriage and divorce. **Well, for some in the Corinthian church, their platonic view of sex – that saw it as gross – led them to contemplate divorce.**
  
- ❖ That’s why Paul wants to challenge this platonic view because he can see where it leads. So in v2, he tells them that “*each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband.*” ‘Have’ being a euphemism for sex (cf. 5:1).
  - Paul is insisting that this popular slogan of theirs – while it may apply to some in certain contexts (see v7) – it certainly does not apply to married couples. **In fact, if you think abstaining from sex with your spouse will draw you closer to God, you’re mistaken.** It could lead you to temptation and drive you further from God.

- ❖ Look at v2 and Paul's reason for why spouses should "have" each other – "*because of the temptation to sexual immorality*". Now I'm sure he could've provided more reasons for why a married couple should frequent their marriage bed. He could've mentioned the importance of **procreation** (Gen 1:28) or the enjoyment of mutual **pleasure** (Prov 5:18-19).
  - But here Paul focuses on **protection**. He's referring to a spiritual protection from the temptation of sexual immorality. Apparently this was the most pressing for them.
  
- ❖ Remember how, in chapter 6, Paul had to say how outrageous it is for a Christian to still be engaging in temple prostitution. If we're correct in assuming the wives in Corinth were largely the ones embracing this platonic view, then could it be that some of their husbands – being deprived of their marriage bed – were reverting back to their old lifestyle of frequenting temple prostitutes to fulfill their sexual desires? It's no excuse at all for such behavior, but it a possible explanation.
  
- ❖ **Paul's point is that husbands and wives should pursue sexual intimacy – not just to please each other – but to protect each other.** By neglecting your marriage bed, you could be making each more susceptible to Satan's attacks. Rather than bringing a married couple closer to God, prolonged abstinence makes them more vulnerable to temptation.
  - **So Paul advises couples not to abstain from sexual relations.** But if they ever do, it should be a mutual decision, and it should be temporary. Listen to 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.*"
  
- ❖ When a couple experiences frustration in their marriage bed, rarely is it ever just due to one cause. Usually there are layers of causes. **But perhaps a reason why there's frustration and why sex is too infrequent in your marriage is because you have a low view of it.** Maybe because of your upbringing or because of painful experiences, you consider sex dirty and shameful. And you've carried that mindset into your marriage bed. I hope this text has been liberating. Paul's point is that sex is not gross. Sex is good, and it's good for marriage.

### **Sex is Not God**

- ❖ So sex is not gross. But 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 to that – perhaps you overreacted.
  - **You turned sex into a god – into an idol.** Sex became everything. 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 around us only encourages 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 have sex.

- ❖ And just as you wouldn't eat one dish for the rest of your life, we're told that it isn't 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's for procreation, for pleasure, for protection – then we'd agree. But that's not it. **What they actually mean is that no one should be ashamed at the extent to which our sexual appetite has grown.**
  
- ❖ But you could argue that our desires have far outgrown our needs. C.S. Lewis acknowledged that sex, like hunger, is a natural desire. **But he went on to argue that if our appetite for food ever grew equal to our appetite for sex, then we'd be considered crazy.** He says imagine traveling to a country where, in that culture, people pay money to watch someone eat a mutton chop – where people ogle at magazine pictures of raw slabs of meat. We'd conclude that these people have an excessive and unhealthy appetite for food.<sup>1</sup>
  - But isn't that what we do with sex? **It's no longer just a thing we desire. It has come to dominate our desires.** Again, sex is not evil. It's not bad. But it can be evil and bad *if* our appetite for sex is inordinate. If it's disproportionate to our need.
  
- ❖ So here, in v7, Paul is challenging the pagan view. The pagan says, "I need sex. I can't live without it. If I never have sex, I'll feel unfulfilled. I'll be less than human."
  - To that Paul responds, "*I wish that all were as I myself am.*" He means someone with the gift of celibacy. He didn't just mean single because there are lots of single people who want to get married and have sex. **But if you have the gift of celibacy (like Paul), that means you're free from a controlling desire for sex or marriage.**
    - So while some in the Corinthian church were trying to impose celibacy on everyone (even the married), Paul saw his celibacy as a gift. Look at v7, "*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.*" **It's a gift from God, so you can't require or expect celibacy for all Christians.**
  
- ❖ But the fact that God *does* give this gift to some – this gift of not needing sex or marriage – then that proves 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. We call Jesus 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.**
  
- ❖ **For those of you who are unmarried, be aware that our culture will not stop in trying to convince you that you need sex.** That abstaining from it is unnatural. That it's unhealthy. The world will say that not having sex is as bad for your health as starving yourself of food.

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<sup>1</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, Book 3, Chapter 5.

- ❖ But Christianity will say, “Don’t despise sex. God designed it for marriage, and he designed it for good.” **But Christianity also says, “Don’t deify sex. Don’t idolize it. It doesn’t make you a more fulfilled human being. It shouldn’t shape your identity.”**
  - Notice how Paul goes on, in vv8-9, to encourage unmarried Christians to see the value in remaining single. He’ll come back to that in the latter half of chapter 7, so we’ll be preaching on Christian singleness in a couple weeks. Look at v8, “*8To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single, as I am.*”
    - **But again, he’s quick to counter that there’s nothing inherently wrong with desiring sex.** That’s what you’d expect from someone who is called to marry. Look at v9, “*9But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion.*”

### Sex is a Gift

- ❖ I hope you see the main point. A Christian is neither a prude nor a pagan. We don’t degrade sex, but neither do we 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 a gift. In the Garden, in Genesis 2, God institutes marriage and gives sex as a gift to the first husband and wife. This is all part of God’s good creation – before sin enters in Genesis 3.
  - So in Genesis 2:24 we read, “*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’d argue that that doesn’t happen in the marriage bed, on the wedding night. I think the two become one when – in that holy moment in a ceremony – a couple makes covenantal vows to each other before God and witnesses. In that moment, God takes two and unites them into one flesh – spiritually one, emotionally one, socially one, economically one, legally one.
  - **And sex consummates marriage because it’s the one act that most clearly communicates this one-flesh spiritual union.** 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.”*”<sup>2</sup> After that initial consummation, whenever you enjoy your marriage bed, you’re renewing and nurturing your one-flesh 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 covenantal commitments.** Every time you enjoy your marriage bed, it’s like you’re holding a private renewal ceremony.
  - In that intimate act, you’re communicating to each other, “I belong completely, permanently, and exclusively to you.” You stand before each other naked and unashamed. Not just physically bare – but emotionally and spiritually bare. **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 communicates.

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<sup>2</sup> Tim Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 224.

- ❖ **God is the One who makes two into one and gives sex as a gift that they in turn give to each other.** We call it a gift, but Paul uses stronger language. Listen to vv3-4, “*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 of sex that a husband gives to his wife is actually her right. It’s her “*conjugal right*”. In giving sex, you’re giving your spouse what they’re due.
  
- ❖ I know 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. But so is the pagan. **To the pagan, the term “*conjugal rights*” is such an outdated, antiquated way to speak about sex.** Sex is not a right! It’s not some duty to perform. That’s so demeaning.
  
- ❖ But it’s important that we read this kind of rights-language in light of v5 – where apparently some in the church were depriving their spouse of sex. So granted, talk of duty and rights is not the only way to define sex, but in this case, it was needed. 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 point is *not* that you have authority over your spouse’s body to do whatever you please. But rather on the fact that, in the marriage bed, I don’t have unilateral authority over my body to do whatever I please. So I shouldn’t neglect my marriage bed because it pleases me to abstain. And at the same time, I shouldn’t make demands in the marriage bed because it pleases me to want it.
    - **The stress here is on the mutuality of sex in marriage.** And the fact that Paul begins by stressing the wife’s conjugal rights is amazing! Greco-Roman culture was strictly patriarchal. Husbands and fathers ruled their homes. 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 in the Christian marriage bed, there is complete 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*.**
  
- ❖ Husband and wife are both trying to reflect the self-giving, sacrificial love of Christ for his Bride, which marriage is meant to signify. Jesus showed his love for us – not by making demands, not by claiming rights – but by laying down his life for us on the cross. **So how can we treat our marriage beds with anything less than the biblical mindset that it is more blessed to give than to receive?**

- ❖ If that's the attitude a husband and wife bring into their marriage bed, then he never has to worry about her being inconsiderate towards his sexual desires. And she never has to worry about him making insensitive sexual demands. **Because both of them are operating out of a gift-mindset. Not selfishly seeking to get. But lovingly seeking to give.**
  - *Do you see how that kind of attitude could transform marriages? Sex is a common source of marital strife.* Imagine our gospel witness and the impact it could make on our unbelieving friends – if we had healthy marriages and healthy marriage beds – characterized by selflessness and sensitivity rather than stress and strife.
  
- ❖ Back in v7, when Paul described his celibacy as a gift, he spoke in terms of each having their own gift from God. **In context, he's implying that marriage and sex in marriage was one gift. And singleness and celibacy was another gift.** One of one kind and one of another.
  - But both are *charisma*. In Greek that literally means “a gift of grace”. It has the word *charis* in it, which is the Greek word for grace. And later on, in chapter 12, Paul uses that same word to describe what we commonly call spiritual gifts.
    - **My point is that marriage – and sex within marriage – is a gift we receive by grace from the Spirit of God, and likewise, it is a gift we can give to our spouse with the same gracious mindset – seeking to please the other, seeking to serve their good.**
  
- ❖ **I just love how this passage challenges both the prude and the pagan and their views on sex.** Sex is not gross. It is good and right to be shared and enjoyed in marriage. But sex is not god either. It is not everything in marriage. **Sex is just one thing – one gift – you can give to your spouse to reaffirm and deepen your one-flesh union.** But let's not forget that marriage is about so much more – it's about the glory of God in the gospel of Jesus Christ.