

# SEX IN MARRIAGE

by Ray C. Stedman

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When we come to the seventh chapter of First Corinthians we plunge right into a very explicit and forthright passage dealing with sex in marriage. Some people are squeamish about hearing this subject taught and preached on a Sunday morning, but the very fact that the Word of God, in all its purity and wholesomeness, treats a subject like this ought to correct that kind of undue scrupulosity among us. It should teach us that this is a subject that is very much worthwhile examining together. Besides, it is a passage of crucial significance for our day.

You will remember from the first part of this letter that there were three young men who had come from the church in Corinth to Ephesus, where Paul was, bringing with them a report on the conditions of the church. (Their names, Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus, are given to us in the last chapter of this letter.) They also brought with them a letter from the church, asking the apostle certain questions.

Now, Paul has not touched upon these questions up to this point in this letter. He wants to build up to the subject with some very necessary, honest dealing with the problems that they had not asked about at Corinth -- and some revelations of truth that they needed to know. (He has been dealing with the subject of sex, the body's sexual powers, and how to handle them.)

Now he has come to the point, and it is very fitting that, at this time, he turns to the letter and begins to answer their questions. You see this in the opening words:

**Now concerning the matters about which you wrote. It is well for a man not to touch a woman. But because of the temptation to immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. {1 Cor 7:1-2 RSV}**

Question #1 on their list seems to be something like this: "In view of the sexual temptations we face in Corinth, is it perhaps better to take a vow of celibacy, to renounce marriage for life, and to withdraw from all contact with the opposite sex?" And Paul's answer is given to us in this very first verse: "It is well for a man not to touch a woman."

Now that question probably arose from the difficulty that some were having with handling their sexual drives. They were living in a sexually-oriented society, very much like what we have in California today. They were facing exposure to temptation in these areas every time they turned around, just as we do today, and some of them were reacting, and saying, "Well, rather than struggle all the time, why not just forget the whole thing and get away from the opposite sex and live as a monk?" (They did not use that term then, perhaps, but that is what it has come to mean.)

You will recognize that this is an attitude that is commonly felt and held. This gave rise to monasticism in the Middle Ages, a very popular practice at that time. People withdrew from all contact in this area, viewing sex itself as defiling, dirty, and unworthy. They viewed the celibate state as a higher level of spirituality. They moved out of the world and built monasteries where men could live among themselves and women could live among themselves in a way that would remove them from all contact, and hopefully (they thought) all struggle in this area. But it did not work, and it never will work. It never is God's intention for the sexes to live separately -- he made them in the beginning to be together. Monasticism proved to be a disaster, as it always proves. You cannot run away from drives that are within you, and Scripture recognizes this.

This question of theirs expressed the idea that, since sex drives create so many problems, it is best to get away and forget it all, and the apostle's answer is that there is nothing wrong with celibacy; it is all right to be single. He stresses that right at the beginning. Nevertheless, he says, because of fornications and the temptations that abound, marriage is preferable in a climate like Corinth. Some have taken that to mean that Paul had a very low

view of marriage -- that it was a kind of "second best" state of affairs -- but, when people feel that way, they have missed the whole thrust of this passage; they have ignored the context around it.

It is true that the apostle was unmarried himself, at least at this time. Scholars differ on this, but there is some evidence that he must have been, or might have been, at least, married at one time in his life. It was a custom among the Jews for young men to marry, and it was very rare that a young man would not get married. Furthermore, Paul was a member of the Sanhedrin at one time, because he tells us that he gave his vote against the Christians. To be a member of the Sanhedrin required marriage, so it is very likely that he was married at one time. What happened to his wife is one of the great mysteries of all time. No one knows. Tradition does not tell us. Scripture does not even mention it. Whether she died, or whether she left him when he became a Christian, or what happened, we have no way of knowing. (That is one of the first questions you can put on your list when you meet the apostle in heaven.) But at this point, anyway, he was unmarried, and he glories in it. Several times in this chapter he will tell us that he considered it an advantage to be single, and he will give us some reasons for it.

So he starts on that note.

There is nothing wrong with single life, nothing at all. "It is well for a man not to touch a woman." Now that is a euphemism for sexual intercourse. It does not mean that it is wrong for a male to physically lay his hand on a woman's shoulder or arm or whatever may be normal in friendship. This is not, as it has sometimes been twisted to mean, an argument against that kind of thing. Paul is saying here that to abstain from sex is not harmful, and it is not wrong, but, if one abstains, a celibate life must be lived in chastity, as he has made clear in the previous context.

Now, however, he says marriage is right too, and he is not talking about marriage and revealing his feelings about the married state in this passage primarily. He is really dealing with sex in marriage. Sex is the subject he is discussing throughout this whole context, and, therefore, he is discussing the proper use of the body's sexual powers. (He has covered sex outside of marriage in Chapter 6, and now he takes it up within marriage. If you want to know what Paul thought of marriage itself read the fifth chapter of Ephesians. There you have an incomparable passage of tremendous beauty setting forth the glory of marriage as the picture of Christ's relationship with his church.)

Here the apostle says three things about sex within marriage. They are very important things, and we will take them one by one:

The first one is suggested here in these opening two verses. Sex within marriage, the apostle says, does permit relief from sexual pressures. Now he does not suggest that you should get married in order to be free from sex drives. That should not be the major reason for marriage, and no part of Scripture ever teaches it as such. What the apostle is saying is that, when you are married, it does free you in this area. It helps to be married when you live in a sex-oriented society.

Several things are indicated by this.

First, right off, it obviously answers the claims of some, notably the Roman Catholic Church, that sex was given to us only for procreation purposes. Doug Goins, our music director, said to me at the early service this morning, "How appropriate that we had all the children up here singing this morning when you are going to talk about sex in marriage." Well, children do come from that. Let us not hide it. The stork story has been blown.

But that is not the only reason sex was given to us. It is clear from a passage like this where married couples are urged, even commanded, to experience sex together and frequently -- not just once in a great while when a child is desired -- that sex is given to us for more than merely carrying on the race. It has another function within marriage, and certainly one of them is to provide mutual pleasure to one another. This is clear, I think, from this passage and other places where the Scriptures touch on this.

I remember when I was a young Christian in my early twenties being given a book that was supposed to teach

me about how to handle sex drives, and what sex was for. It was called, *The Way of a Man with a Maid*. It had some helpful things in it, especially designed for Christians to show that sex is a gift of God, but one of the things it taught was that the best marriages are based upon only having sex when you want to have children. I did not recognize it at the time because it seemed to me to be a book that was highly respected and taught, and that it was in line with the Biblical teaching, but I have come since to see that it represented a terrible distortion of the Biblical position on sexuality. There is a wealth of literature today that is available to us in this realm that much more accurately reflects the Biblical teaching along this line.

One thing is clear: Sex in marriage is given to us for the mutual pleasure of those involved. It is the highest form of physical ecstasy, without a doubt. It rates as the number one recreation of the world, and there is no question about that. It always has been, and it always will be. Nothing compares to it, and God likes it that way; he designed it that way. He gave us our erogenous zones and permitted them, intended them, to be aroused and excited. He intended for human beings to experience this exquisite ecstasy of orgasm, but he designed that it be protected, that it be experienced within walls of security which only marriage, as the Bible envisions it, can provide.

Within those marriage bonds, sex is designed to be an exquisite pleasure which a married couple experiences frequently, as frequently as they mutually desire, and to whatever degree it may be desired. This is what is meant in Hebrews 13:4 where it says, "Marriage is honorable in all, and the bed undefiled:" {cf, Heb 13:4 KJV}. Therefore, those who twist certain passages of Scripture to indicate that sex is something that really should be kept secret and not openly discussed even in marriage are mistaking and missing the whole purpose of Scripture.

Having said that marriage is a way of relieving sexual pressures, Paul now says something else very significant. He says sex in marriage is designed of God to teach us something about ourselves, and to fulfill a missing need in our partners. You see this in Verses 3-5:

**The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights and likewise the wife to her husband. For the wife does not rule over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not rule over his own body, but the wife does. Do not refuse one another [or to put it more bluntly, as the Greek actually does and as we read in the King James Version, "Defraud ye not one the other"] except perhaps by agreement for a season, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, lest Satan tempt you through lack of self-control. {1 Cor 7:3-5 RSV}**

The major thrust of that paragraph is telling us that sex in marriage is designed for the fulfillment of each partner.

This is what the Song of Solomon so beautifully captures. We read a paragraph together from that this morning just to catch the flavor of that beautiful book, written to describe the exquisite ecstasy of sexual love within marriage. That is what that book is about. Unfortunately, Victorian squeamishness has so prevailed in the Church that most people do not know that. They think it is a book written to be an allegory about Christ and the Church. Well now, since marriage is that kind of an allegory, that is a legitimate use of that book, but it is not what it was written about. It was written to describe the courtship and wedding and subsequent married life of a young couple who before God were seeking to explore and discover all the beautiful relationships that God intended when he made our bodies different from one another, when he made our psyches different from one another, even our spiritual hungers different in male and female and brought the two together. That is what marriage is all about. Therefore, you have in the beautiful language of the Song of Solomon a marvelous description of the ecstasy, the enjoyment, the pleasure that sex is designed to give.

There are several important statements in this paragraph that we need to bear in mind when thinking about that: First, you will notice that Paul does not say to the husband and the wife, "Demand your own sexual rights." He never puts it in that way, and yet as a marriage counselor I can say that I have been involved in scores of cases where one of the major problems of the marriage was that one partner, usually the man, demanded his sexual rights from his wife. (Occasionally it has been the woman who was the aggressor.)

Nothing, perhaps, is more destructive to marital happiness than that -- for the male to come and demand that his wife submit to him in this area, whenever he feels like it. To mistake and mistreat the passage where it speaks of the wife not ruling over her own body and thinking of this as giving license to the husband to demand sex whenever he wants it is to destroy the whole beauty of sex in marriage. Nothing is more hurtful to a relationship than that, and Paul does not say that.

Not once does he ever suggest that you have the right to demand sex from your mate. What he says is that what you have the right to do is to give him or her, as a gift from you, the fulfillment of these sexual desires -- and the responsibility you have is not to your mate, but to the Lord to do so. It is a matter that Paul puts on the basis of the relationship that a believer has with his or her Lord, and it is the Lord who asks us to give this gift to our mates in marriage, and thus to make it a basis of mutual fulfillment and satisfaction. In other words, sex in marriage is a gift that you are to freely offer to each other. It is not a selfish, self-centered satisfying of your own desire.

If we understand that it is going to make a big difference in many marriages, and, if you reflect on it a moment, you will see why. I suggested last week that physical sex is given to us to teach us how to relate to one another psychologically, and how to relate to God spiritually, and this is true in this area. Sex is so designed that we have no control over it ourselves within marriage. We need another to minister to us, and that is designed of God in order to teach us how to relate and fulfill the basic law of life which Jesus put in these terms when he said, "If you attempt to save your life you will lose it," {cf, Matt 16:25, Mark 8:35, Luke 17:33, John 12:25}. If you try to meet your own need, if you put that first in your life -- "I am going to have my needs met" -- the result will be that you will lose the joy of life and you will lose everything you are trying to gain. Instead of finding fulfillment you will find emptiness, and you will end your years looking back upon a wasted experience. You cannot get fulfillment that way.

That is not merely good advice -- that is a law of life, as inviolable as the law of gravity. You cannot beat it any way you try. The only way to find your needs met and yourself fulfilled is to fulfill another's needs. Throw your life away, Jesus said, and you will find it. That is what sex is all about. It is designed not to have your needs met, but to meet another's needs. Thus, in marriage, you have a beautiful reciprocity. In the process of devoting yourself to the enjoyment of your mate, and to giving him or her the most exquisite sense of pleasure that you can, you find your own needs met. That is what is meant by Verse 4, "For the wife does not rule over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not rule over his own body, but the wife does," {1 Cor 7:4 RSV}. That is not saying that you are slaves of one another. It is saying that the power to give fulfillment to your mate lies with you. He or she cannot fulfill himself or herself in this area. It is impossible. That is why sex with yourself, solo sex, is a drag. It does not go anywhere. It is a dead-end street. It is a momentary, mechanical fulfillment that leaves you psychologically unfulfilled. The only way those psychological fulfillments can be met is by your partner giving you the gift of fulfillment and you giving him or her the same gift.

This is why God made us with that quality of needing someone else to fulfill us sexually. This is why unresponsiveness on the part of a partner in sex always creates a problem in marriage. Frigidity, of whatever type it may be or for whatever cause, creates deep-seated psychological problems in a marriage and a rift occurs. You only need to talk to some experienced marriage counselors to know how true that is. God has given us the ability to give a gift of love and response to another person, and the joy of doing so is what creates the ecstasy of sexual love in marriage.

So important is this to marriage that the apostle goes on to say that it takes precedence over everything else in your life except an occasional spiritual retreat for prayer. "Do not refuse one another except perhaps by agreement..." If you are going to do this, it has to be a mutual thing. You must not give up or deny your partner the right to this kind of enjoyment. To unilaterally take action to refuse to involve yourself in a sexual union in marriage is to violate this very command of God, and to hurt the marriage very severely.

Again I could fill that in with many, many experiences taken from real life. As always, the Scriptures examine us at the deepest level of our being, and here Paul puts his finger on what is one of the most frequent causes for disaster in marriage -- a unilateral refusal to grant the gift of enjoyment and pleasure to one's mate. He says, "Don't do that" -- with one possible exception. If you both agree to do so, and if you do so for a brief

season and you do so for a spiritual reason, i.e., to have more time for working out a special problem in prayer, then it is all right. But it can be such a destructive thing in marriage that Paul says, "Be careful. Don't continue it very long, and by all means come together again, lest Satan be given an advantage over you." Those are very wise words, and Paul is underscoring here much that is causing problems in marriages today.

Now he says a third thing about sex in marriage that is very important, Verses 6 and 7:

**I say this by way of concession, not of command. I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own special gift from God, one of one kind and one of another. {1 Cor 7:6-7 RSV}**

In other words, what Paul is saying is that sex in marriage manifests a special gift of God. Marriage itself is a gift from God, just as singleness is, and some have one gift and some another, but both express some unique quality about God himself that is intended to be manifest by that state. The word "this" here in Verse 6 is looking back, not just to the immediate context but clear back to Verse 2, where Paul was talking about the gift of being married versus the gift of being single. What he is saying is, "Marriage is not for all." Paul himself glories in being single, but both states, singleness and marriage, are a gift from God, and sexuality in marriage reflects a special beauty of God; it illustrates something about God. I think it illustrates that uniqueness of relationship within the Trinity, and, as we are told in Ephesians 5, between the Lord and his people. It illustrates a oneness of spirit and identity of person that can only be manifested when two human beings, weak and struggling and failing in many ways, nevertheless learn to live together and love one another despite the problems and the heartaches they experience.

On the other hand, singleness without sex reflects another beauty of God. It permits a quality of dedication to a single goal that is often highly admired by everyone around. We all know people like this who have never married, who have given themselves to achieve a certain goal in life. This too illustrates something about God. So these states of life are gifts from God and we must view them as such, and marriage no less than singleness.

This brings the apostle to a related matter which he takes up now in Verses 8-9: What about the sexual lives of people who once were married but now are no longer?

**To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well for them to remain single as I do. But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion. {1 Cor 7:8-9 RSV}**

The King James Version puts that, "It is better to marry than to burn." I remember hearing a sermon years ago from a country preacher in Texas on the text, "It's better to be married than to be burned." All the young people in his church went out and got marriage licenses right away! Nobody wanted to be burned, but that, of course, is not what Paul is talking about.

He is talking about "burning" with passion. Paul is saying here that if you have been married and now are no longer, he understands that your sexual lives have been fully awakened in marriage. You are used to finding these drives and pressures met, and now suddenly deprived of your mate either by divorce or by widowhood, you no longer have a way of satisfying these desires. What about them? (Later on in this chapter Paul is going to talk to the unmarried, and by that he means those who have never married. He calls them "virgins." Here, obviously, he is talking about those who have been divorced and widowed who once were married.)

This can create quite a problem. I remember years ago reading Catherine Marshall's book written shortly after the death of her famous husband, Dr. Peter Marshall, and with all frankness she said that what to do about her awakened desires for love, sexual love from her husband, was a real problem in her life. Many a widow struggles with this; many a divorcee has struggled with this.

The apostle's word is, "If it is possible, remain single. You can now, having learned many great lessons from life, give yourself, perhaps, more fully to the work of the Lord than you ever were able to before. This is an opportunity to do so." (I should put in here, however, that, in the letter to Titus, Paul almost commands young

widows to remarry. He says that would be much better for them. But if you are older and you have lost your mate, then remain single is his advice.) That is best, but if the physical struggle is severe, well then marry again. There is nothing wrong in it. It is all right. Thus he graciously, and with the wisdom of God himself, encourages and gives advice to people who have once been married. (This leads to a discussion of the break up of marriage, of the matters of divorce. We will be taking that passage next week.)

It is clear as you look at this passage, where Paul has dealt so frankly and so explicitly with these matters, that the essence of marital happiness, sexually, is made up of three ingredients:

1. First, of love to God. The body is made for the Lord. We learned that last week, and, therefore, what the Lord wants you to do with your body should be all-compelling. It should govern what your decisions are.
2. The second ingredient in sexual happiness is a discipline of self -- a willingness to put your own needs second to those of your mate in this area, and to give yourself, to give the gift of beauty and love and fulfillment to one another continually.
3. A good marriage, of course, always has a husband and wife giving gifts to one another. We have certain times of the year when everybody does it so it is easy to get on the bandwagon. You give a gift on your anniversary, and you give a gift on your wife's birthday, hopefully, and you give a gift, perhaps, on Mother's Day and other times. But the best marriages are made up of husbands and wives who are always giving gifts to each other -- buying little trinkets here, bringing home something from a trip, your eye being caught by something in a market or a bargain store or whatever that you think your mate will enjoy, and getting it. That is a way of saying to your mate, "I'm thinking of you. You are important to me. I love you." The greatest gift along that line is sex if it is given with that same spirit of joy and thanksgiving and gratitude and willingness to give pleasure. Nothing is more important than that, but it calls for a refusal to indulge in self and self-satisfaction. The third ingredient, therefore, is mutual respect for one another.

Love to God, discipline for self, and a mutual respect for one another. This constitutes, then, two lives learning to unite in the Lord.

That is probably the most beautiful thing God produces on this earth. It surpasses everything else. If you have ever seen an old married couple who have been in love for years and have learned how to relate in happiness and peace and joy with one another you know something of the quiet beauty of that relationship. It blesses everybody when they see this, and that is what God has in mind for marriage.

Examine your own marriage in the light of this, or if you are not yet married and you feel God is heading you that way, think these things through.

## **Prayer**

Our Father, once again we thank you for the frankness with which your Word deals with these matters. Forgive our squeamishness, our unnecessary prudishness about these things. Teach us, Lord, the beauty and the glory and the joy of sexuality. Help us to learn how to express it in ways that give honor to you and fulfill your divine intention for us. May the marriages that are represented here this morning increasingly become beautiful pictures of a deep relationship, of the harmony of two different lives becoming one beautiful and attractive person. We ask in the name of Jesus our Lord, Amen.

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