

# THE MARRIAGE COUNSELOR

By Steve Zeisler

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One evening recently I enjoyed hearing a couple from our body singing Tevya's and Golde's duet from *Fiddler on the Roof*. Tevya begins by asking his wife of 25 years,

'Golde, do you love me?'  
'Do I what?'  
'Do you love me?'  
'The first time I met you was on our wedding day.'  
'I was scared.'  
'I was shy.'  
'I was nervous.'  
'So was I.'  
'But my father and my mother said we'd learn to love each other.  
So I ask you, Golde, do you love me?'"  
'For 25 years I've washed your clothes, cooked your meals,  
cleaned your house, given you children, milked your cow.

After 25 years, why talk about love right now?'  
'Do you love me?'  
'For 25 years I've talked with him, fought with him, starved with him.  
For 25 years my bed is his,  
If that's not love, what is?'  
'So you do love me!'  
'I suppose I do.'  
'And I suppose I love you too.  
'It doesn't change a thing.  
But even after 25 years, it's nice to know.'

It's fascinating to consider the viewpoint of an old-world married couple who look at things so very differently than we do today. In this song they tell of their decision to be committed to each other and to share their lives together. They met for the first time on their wedding day, but that did not deflect them one bit from the course they decided to embark on, a marriage relationship. Love would flower later. The sense of who each was in relation to the other, the feeling of approval and belonging, the intimacy they would experience, all flowed out of their original decision to give themselves to one another.

We live in a vastly different world. A recent report which has caused quite a stir sets out the widespread dissatisfaction of women with men in the United States. According to this report, American women are unfulfilled and unhappy in their marriages. In almost all discussion of marriage, the emphasis seems to be placed on how married people can feel better about themselves and "get in touch with their feelings." The hope is that when they have done this, only then can concerns about behavior be discussed and remedied.

In our study from 1 Corinthians this morning we will see that the apostle Paul, the marriage counselor whom we will be consulting, has far more in common with Tevya and Golde than he has with modern-day theorists. His first concern is not to discuss our feelings, or how to change them, but rather with the kind of people we are. Will we be obedient? Will we act in the way we should act? If we will, we may confidently expect that eventually we will learn to feel for one another in a loving and romantic way.

Paul had been asked for his advice on a series of earthy and practical questions which the Corinthians put to him. He will answer in the same fashion--in practical and earthy terms. In chapter 6, Paul the theologian holds forth on the spiritual nature of our sexuality. Our bodies are "temples of the Holy Spirit," said Paul. We are "one spirit with Christ," we learned; we are "members of Christ." Thus, there is no such thing as inconsequential sex. But in today's passage, Paul becomes the marriage counselor, laying aside theological language, speaking as a wise brother on a number of practical situations.

There is no one proper course for Christians to live out the fact that they are male and female. Singleness at times is God's gift to some believers. At times, marriage will be a believer's calling. At times, one who was once married will have the gift of singleness. Remarriage will be God's gift on other occasions. There is no single condition in which all Christians must live.

As an undergraduate student, I shared a house with a number of other Christian men. As single men, we of course had numerous discussions on women. We all seemed to agree, however, with the notion that while it was great to have girls as friends--and it must be equally fulfilling to be married, we agreed--how one got from being a friend to being married was very murky territory indeed. A friend who was a member of the Navigators told me that they were known as the "never-daters" during their college days. In our house we had much the same problem.

One of our group, however, loved to date. We were somewhat in awe of this guy who obviously had progressed beyond our grade in male-female relationships. Thus our home was the scene of a group of young Christian American men who were struggling in their efforts to be holy, dedicated believers. On the other hand, some time ago I was in West Africa and I met a number of couples there who were just like Tevya and Golde. Their marriages had been arranged for them by their parents and they were quite content and happy with their lives.

So there are various states which are quite proper for believers, and there are various ways to arrive there. Our need, as Christians, is for wise and godly counsel to help us see that God can work in our situations whether we are single or married.

## **SOME TROUBLESOME ISSUES**

As we have already pointed out, here in chapter 7 we find Paul answering specific questions asked of him by certain believers in Corinth.

Now concerning the things about which you wrote, it is good for a man not to touch a woman. But because of immoralities, let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband.

The phrase, "it is good for a man not to touch a woman," has nothing to do with a hug, a handshake or any other manifestation of fellowship or friendship. Paul is here referring to sexual intercourse. It is "good" for some, says the apostle, that they not experience intimate sexual relations. In Corinth, as in our world today, there were certain people who, in response to the licentious nature of the times, committed themselves to forego sex entirely. But the trouble was they insisted on demanding the same behavior from other believers.

Others in Corinth, however (and they too have their counterparts today), considered it unthinkable to forego sex. They believed that there were dire consequences in store for ascetics. Writing to Christians who were part of the environment that gave rise to both of these ways of thinking, the apostle says that sexual abstinence is "good" for some--but it is not the only way.

Paul will now go on to refer to the alternative, which is Christian marriage. Singleness is fine, says Paul, but so is marriage. "Because of immoralities, let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband." If you choose to "touch a woman" (in the sense of verse 1), one righteous option stands in contrast to various "immor-alities." All other sexual relationships, whether with mistresses, adulterers, prostitutes, etc.,

are immoral. The only option left for someone who chooses to physically express his or her sexuality is marriage to one mate. How earthy and practical are the apostle's words!

## **STRAIGHT TALK ON SEX**

In verse 3 and following, the apostle will now proceed to answer the questions of those who have partaken of the gift of Christian marriage.

Let the husband fulfill his duty to his wife, and likewise also the wife to her husband. The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; and likewise also the husband does not have authority over over his own body; but the wife does. Stop depriving one another, except by agreement for a time that you may devote yourselves to prayer, and come together again lest Satan tempt you because of your lack of self-control. But this I say by way of concession, not of command.

I believe Paul was once married. It is therefore safe to say that he is not writing here as a theoretical observer, as it were, of marriage. Although it is obvious from this and others of his writings that he was not married during the years of his Christian ministry, as a one-time member of the Sanhedrin of the Jews, marriage would have been a requirement for him. Some have felt that the apostle's wife abandoned him when he came to faith in Christ. He later speaks in this chapter of an unbelieving spouse who will not consent to live with his mate. That, perhaps, was an experience which he himself suffered. In any case, Paul is quite at home writing about sex and marriage.

The apostle's first word of counsel is that husbands and wives should agree that each has authority over the other's body. There is no discussion in these passages of the privileges of marriage. Rather, what we are given is counsel on what are our responsibilities in marriage. The husband must fulfill his responsibility to be his wife's lover and she must be the same for him. The husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does; the wife does not have authority over her own body, the husband does.

We must make the point immediately that the apostle is not referring to unhealthy marriages where perversion of sexual expression is practiced, or where violence or sexual dominance are forced upon mates. To women who find themselves subject to such kinds of abuse, the statement, "the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does," is a terrifying thing. The apostle, rather, is offering counsel to Christian couples who have healthy physical desires but who are self-centered and selfish in their sexual expression.

Here Paul shares some very practical, down-to-earth counsel. "Your bodies," he is saying, "are for the purpose of giving your partner pleasure. You don't even have authority over your bodies anymore. They are for the delight and response of your mates. Stop focusing on having your own desires met."

Notice how evenhanded is the apostle's counsel. This is remarkable advice given the fact that Paul was writing in the first century. How undeserved is the charge often heard today that he was a male chauvinist! His word applies equally to men and women.

Is your spouse becoming more fulfilled, more free and more joyful in your mutual sexual expression? Is that your goal? Certain practical implications follow naturally from this. All of our tensions and stresses, psychologists have noted, show up in our sexual expression. Arguments, fears, anger and frustrations will restrict one's freedom to respond and to enjoy sexual intimacy. In his counsel to married people to use their bodies to fulfill their partners therefore, the apostle thrusts upon married couples the task of solving their other problems.

To ensure your mate's sexual fulfillment, it is necessary to talk, to listen, to know, to understand and spend time with him or her. In order to do what the apostle Paul commands here, husbands and wives need to be willing to learn all the other wisdom that makes marriage function and flourish. In this pithy word of advice to married couples, the apostle is opening the door to his readers' learning to be lovers at every level, because one

thing is contingent upon the other. Paul's counsel requires one to listen, to communicate, to be sensitive, in order to give the gift that one is commanded to give.

If sex has become lifeless and perfunctory, this is the answer. If the passion has disappeared from marriage, it is restored by making godly choices. We can choose to see and long for beauty or strength in someone whom we have come to take for granted. Such choices lead to developing again an inner response that will allow physical passion to develop.

So when they agree with the word of Scripture that they give their bodies to each other, husbands and wives must thereby ensure that they are already working on all the other problems they face in their relationships.

In verse 5 the apostle holds that there are times when, for the sake of spiritual growth, husbands and wives should devote themselves to prayer. At times we may decide to not answer the telephone, prepare food, or interact with others. We deliberately decide to shut out all sensory input in order to spend time with the Lord. This is an appropriate element of the rhythm of life. Afterwards, we can resume our responsibilities as husband or wife. Our lives should have a rhythm of times spent alone with the Lord, and time spent in responsible living together.

Paul is an extremely wise counselor. He is aware that this decision to forego marital relations may be used merely as an excuse. That is why he directs that any such decision must be made by mutual consent. Thus a spouse may not suddenly decide to become spiritually-minded and push aside his or her mate. That would be to take advantage of a spiritual directive and make it an excuse for wrong behavior. Jesus castigated the scribes and Pharisees for neglecting to support their parents because they claimed to have given their money to God. They were availing themselves of this ruse so as to avoid their responsibilities.

Thus, husbands and wives should abstain from sexual relations only by mutual consent--and then only for a time, says the apostle, "lest Satan tempt you because of your lack of self-control." Paul is not only referring to sexual temptations, but temptation to bitterness, anger and resentment. As days, perhaps weeks and months go by, feelings of rejection can lead to such temptations, thereby giving Satan a foothold for further damage. This is why Paul suggests that, after a time, couples "come together again."

It is by concession, not command, says the apostle, that he shares these things. Here again, Paul is conceding that all people are not called to be married.

## **THE GIFT OF SINGLENESS**

Having dealt with marriage, Paul now turns to the other alternative available, that of singleness. Verse 7:

Yet I wish that all men were even as I myself am. However, each man has his own gift from God, one in this manner, and another in that. But I say to the unmarried and to the widows that it is good for them if they remain even as I. But if they do not have self-control, let them marry; for it is better to marry than to burn.

Singleness, like marriage, is also a gift from God. As is the case with spiritual gifts, this gift is given by his sovereign hand. Both are perfectly legitimate and blessed options. Our assignment from God, which is always appropriate for us, will increasingly seem to be so. We will be enabled to appreciate it and rejoice in it.

What needs work, the apostle is pointing out, is the condition of being single and unhappy because of it. Paul will later point out that the state of being single is of particular advantage for Christians as they will then have far more time for Christian activities. But it is always inappropriate to be unmarried and miserable because of it. It is wrong for singles to have their every experience tainted with frustration because of their singleness.

Furthermore, Paul's reference "it is better to marry than to burn," is not merely speaking of physical desires. He has already declared that Christians should flee immorality. Christians can say no to improper sexual

expression. They have the freedom in Christ to do so. Here Paul is referring to the longing, the desire, not just the physical desire, but the emotional longing for intimacy, for family, for all that goes with having a partner in life. For some singles, that kind of attitude can become a consuming fire, an idol in their lives.

Paul's advice to singles who in his words "do not have self-control," may seem obvious and not helpful: "let them marry," he counsels. "Sure," replies the lonely single, "that's what I've been trying to do for years." But the apostle's advice here is not at all unlike his word to married couples in verse 3. The simple command to act requires one to probe and learn in many areas of life previously ignored.

The lesson that must be learned, of course, is why the "burning" single person is not already married. What have they not yet discovered about themselves? Are they suffering under some fear that they could have conquered in Christ? Is there an arrogance about them which they are unaware of which they must work on so that in time they too will find partners suited to them? Some singles are unrealistic in the high standards which they demand of potential spouses. Others have yet to learn how unfulfilling is the singleminded pursuit of career advancement and material success.

Singles who take to heart the apostolic assignment therefore, and who want to be married, must ask themselves, and their brothers and sisters in Christ, what it is about them that needs changing so that they may indeed enter into the married state. If they determine to do this, all the energy which they formerly put into feeling miserable and unthankful for their circumstances can now be channeled toward the positive direction of what they themselves can do to change.

Our assignment in life, whether married or single, is a gift from God. Singleness is a wonderful gift. If that is God's choice for you, you need never apologize for it. It is perfectly appropriate to remain single throughout your life. And it's also perfectly appropriate to be married. That too is a wonderful gift from God.

"...you are not your own...," said the apostle at the end of chapter 6, "...you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body." Here in chapter 7 he counsels married people that their bodies are not their own, they belong to their spouses. The pattern which Paul establishes contradicts everything we see and hear in the world around. Our bodies are our own, we hear. We should not deny them any pleasure, but give ourselves to enjoyment so as to have our needs met. But Scripture says a flat no to this kind of thinking. Our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit and we exist to serve God. And, if we are married, our bodies are to give pleasure and joy to our spouses.

The sooner we stop thinking that our sexuality is designed solely to give us pleasure, the wiser and more grown up we will become. Emotional pleasure, character, inner health and appreciation do not just happen overnight, despite what we read and hear. It is wiser to obey and to grow.

Perhaps we too one day will be able to song, along with Tevya, "Do you love me?" That is when we will realize, following a lifetime of serving one another, that there was more love manifest than we ever thought we would experience. We have created something beautiful together. Because of the choices we made we were allowed to have certain experiences. God gives the joy of everything we had hoped for, whether married or single, to those who were committed to doing what was right for his sake.

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