

SEXUAL INTIMACY IN MARRIAGE

SERIES: LIFESTYLE ISSUES IN THE CHURCH

by Doug Goins

"My husband and I have been married for fifteen years. We have two children under the age of ten. There's been very little intimacy in our marriage, either emotional or physical. I've been the initiator and my husband the avoider. We've gone to a Christian marriage counselor, and my husband is now going for therapy. But I have lost absolutely all my feeling for him. As a Christian, where do I go from here?" (1)

This poignant cry for intimacy in a marriage relationship is the opening paragraph of a wonderful book by Dr. Clifford Penner and his wife Joyce Penner. (He's a clinical psychologist, and she's a registered nurse.) I wish I had seen this book thirty years ago when I was first starting out in marriage.

Where do we go to deal with this issue of sexual intimacy in marriage? The answer is the word of God, because it very clearly and unashamedly explains who we are as sexual beings created in God's image. God is the Creator of every single good gift, including sexual expression, and both Testaments of our Bible wonderfully emphasize the value and goodness of sexuality in our lives. The Bible handles this subject in a very wholesome way. The passage before us is appropriately explicit--neither technical and clinical, like some kind of sex manual, nor erotic and titillating in any sense. Understanding our human sexuality as it was given to be expressed in marriage is above all spiritually edifying. Truth liberates. And that's what I hope God does for us in this study.

The heart of the passage before us, 1 Corinthians 7:1-9, is probably verses 3-4. Eugene Peterson paraphrases these verses in *The Message* as follows:

"The marriage bed must be a place of mutuality, the husband seeking to satisfy his wife, the wife seeking to satisfy her husband. Marriage is not a place to stand up for your rights. Marriage is a decision to serve the other, whether in bed or out." (2)

Paul begins in verse 1 by addressing some confusion in the church in Corinth over sexual abstinence.

**Now concerning the things about which you wrote,
it is good for a man not to touch a woman.**

Up to this point in the letter, Paul has been dealing with sinful struggles in the life of the church in Corinth that he had heard about by word of mouth. In 1 Corinthians 1:11 Paul says, "...I have been informed concerning you, my brethren, by Chloe's people, that there are quarrels among you." So for the next four chapters he addresses what he was told the church was struggling with. In 5:1, again he heard something by word of mouth: "It is actually reported that there is immorality among you..." And then in chapters 5 and 6 he deals with sexual immorality and with legal immorality, if you will, in that body of believers.

But now, beginning in 7:1, Paul is going to respond to a whole series of questions that were addressed to him in a letter from the leadership of the church in Corinth. They were questions about practical issues like marriage, divorce, singleness, food offered to idols, spiritual gifts, public worship, what happens to our bodies when we die, and finally, a concern about an offering to be taken for some believers in Jerusalem who were in poverty. Paul will devote the rest of this letter to answering these questions.

But as Paul begins to respond to these things in this new section of the letter, it doesn't mean that this topic of sex in marriage is disconnected from the discussion of sexuality that preceded it in chapter 6. In Paul's mind they are logically connected. In 6:19-20 he concluded, "Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body." God is honored in the good choices we make in expressing our sexuality.

We saw in chapters 5 and 6 how we can dishonor God in our bodies through sexual immorality. There was a specific problem of incest in the church of Corinth. There were also some Christian men going to prostitutes, apparently justifying their immorality with a couple of popular slogans on which they tried to put a Christian twist: "All things are lawful for me. I'm free in Christ. So I can do what I want with my sexuality." And, "Food is for the stomach, and the stomach is for food. Sex is a natural bodily function that I should be free to express, just as I am free to eat." These Christians were advocating an immoral type of sexual freedom, but they hadn't written a letter to Paul to brag about the position they had taken. He was their spiritual father, an apostle of Jesus Christ, and they weren't going to communicate to him formally about their hedonistic slogans or behavior. He heard about it word of mouth.

In 6:12-20 we heard him thunder against their rationalized sexual indulgence and warn them of the dangers of immorality. But he also brought them a word of grace and hope. Sexual purity was possible through the power of the Holy Spirit who indwelt them. God could be glorified in their bodies.

SEXUAL INTIMACY IN MARRIAGE

Now in 7:1 Paul quotes another group of Christians in Corinth, people who completely disagreed with the sexual-freedom party in the church. These people reacted very strongly to the promiscuity of Corinthian culture and to the sexual license of their hedonistic brothers and sisters in the church, and they wanted the apostle to know about this. So they included it in their list of questions. It's almost as if they were showing off what they considered a very spiritual perspective. "It is good for a man not to touch a woman." The most spiritual response they could come up with to struggles with sexuality was to refrain entirely from sexual activity in life.

That phrase "to touch a woman" is translated "to marry" in the New International Version (3), but this is incorrect. The phrase has to do with sexual relations. Introducing the idea of marriage confuses the point that they were promoting. Their super-spirituality went way beyond specific circumstances or even celibacy. These people were promoting asceticism, or universal abstinence. The most thoroughly Christian husbands in Corinth would refrain from sexual intercourse with their wives. Dr. Gordon Fee, in his commentary on the book of 1 Corinthians, captures the spiritual pride of this group of people in their skewed religious rationale for sexual abstinence, by creating some historical fiction:

"Since you have denied immorality, Paul, in your letters to us, is it not so that one is better off not to have sexual intercourse at all? After all, didn't Jesus say that in the new age, which we have already entered by the Spirit, there is neither marrying nor giving in marriage? Why should we not be as the angels now?" (4)

I doubt whether you are very much swayed by the logic of this call to total sexual abstinence as an ideal for all believers, whether you're single or married. Our problems in the church today generally parallel those of the hedonistic group far more than they reflect any ascetic sensitivities. We tend more to look for rationalizations of behavior that violates God's desire for sexual purity. But as far as the apostle is concerned, both positions are wrong. (A bit farther on, he is going to deal with the appropriateness of celibate purity in the life of a Christian single.)

Beginning in verse 2, Paul disagrees with the idea that it's a good thing for husbands and wives not to share sexual intimacy. This passage breaks out into two major sections. In verses 2-7 Paul offers godly counsel for full sexual expression in marriage. In verses 8-9 he offers godly counsel to the formerly married, whether widowed or divorced.

The first important point Paul makes, in verses 2-4, is if we're going to grow in our sexual expression in

marriage, we need to cultivate sexual intimacy.

But because of immoralities, let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband. 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 his own body, but the wife does.

Each of these three verses emphasizes an important issue that the apostle wants us to open ourselves to. Verse 2 is a strong pro-marriage imperative. If we're going to grow in sexual intimacy in marriage, we've got to be committed to the fact that this is a permanent, ongoing, open-hearted, monogamous relationship. You can grow sexually when you're secure in the relationship with each other. This is both a response to the ascetic slogan in their letter and a remedy for the cases of immorality in the church. Literally it says in the Greek, "Let each man be having his own wife, and each woman be having her own husband." The phrase "be having" means to be in continuing sexual relations with the wife or husband. So the clear apostolic word is that those who are married should frequently express sexual intimacy with each other throughout their marriage. Disobedience to this imperative increases the temptation, Paul warns, to commit adultery. Sex within marriage does permit relief from sexual pressures.

Eugene Peterson paraphrases verse 2 this way:

"It's good for a man to have a wife and for a woman to have a husband. Sexual drives are strong, but marriage is strong enough to contain them and provide for a balanced and fulfilling sexual life in a world of sexual disorder." (5)

That disorder and unsettledness comes when there is not a committed, permanent, monogamous relationship sexually. There is tremendous insecurity in promiscuity and even in a committed relationship that doesn't have the security of marriage around it. When that is the circumstance, sex is performance-based. It's often the single fragile thread that holds people together. That kind of erotic love lasts as long as the magic excites, as long as the physical attracts, as long as the sensual pleasure is assured. That's a frighteningly chaotic way to live. In contrast, God's kind of love and marriage lasts, no matter what. It's a lifetime of growing together spiritually, emotionally, and sexually. For newlyweds just beginning, it's tremendously encouraging to know that they have the rest of their life to grow into greater and greater sexual intimacy. It becomes richer and deeper the longer they live together.

A MUTUAL DEBT OF LOVE IN MARRIAGE

Verse 3 speaks of the reality of mutual indebtedness to fulfill a duty. Again, it's an imperative that is strongly pro-marriage. Literally it says in the Greek, "Give back that which is owed." Paul is saying that sexual intimacy is a mysterious obligation that each partner is called to fulfill for the other. It's a debt of love in God's economy of marriage.

Husbands and wives have equal responsibility before the Lord to fulfill the sexual needs and desires of their spouse. There is complete mutuality within the marriage in the matter of sexual rights. God gave the gift of sex in marriage for the pleasure and fulfillment of each partner equally. Paul doesn't say to me as a husband that I have a right to demand that my wife pay a sexual debt to me, either by giving me what I want sexually or by allowing me to withhold sex from her. It's just the opposite--I owe her a debt of love. I'm to serve her sexually with a loving commitment to meet her needs, on her terms, in her timing. I'm to give up my sexual rights to the Lord in order to meet the needs of my wife. If we reverse that equation, it will threaten marital fulfillment ultimately. Consistent sexual selfishness will destroy intimacy between a husband and a wife. The Lord Jesus said, "For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it..." (Matthew 16:25.) But the good news is that sexual intimacy in marriage can be strengthened if we independently commit ourselves to meeting the needs of our spouse.

In verse 4 is the issue of giving up authority over our own bodies, the exhilaration of surrendering personal independence. In the last message ([Discovery Paper 4520](#)), we learned about the body, the *soma*. This is the

broadest, fullest, richest sense of the word "body." It's everything we are physically, emotionally, and spiritually. We're designed by God to be an instrument of communication verbally, nonverbally, emotionally, physically, and sexually. The physical expression of sex as communication is enjoyed in the larger context of verbal communication. The greatest sexual fulfillment comes gradually over the long haul in a marriage, as a couple learns to talk about anything, any time; when there's heart-to-heart communication, not just talking at each other, but listening actively and sensitively, caring deeply about the communication.

This issue of authority is very important. Married people no longer have control over their own bodies, but must surrender authority over them to their spouses. Again, marriage is a partnership. Paul's words here stand in sharp contrast to the prevailing cultural norms in the first century, when the only sexual rights that mattered were men's. Women basically were there to serve men and to submit to them. So Paul is being radically counter-culture when he talks about this mutuality.

Now why is it so important to surrender authority, and to choose to be a servant? Because the power to give sexual fulfillment to my wife lies with me, not with her. Ultimately, spiritually, at the deepest levels of her being she cannot fulfill herself. And I must be willing to give her authority over my sexual fulfillment. That's why solitary sex is so hollow and unsatisfying. There is physiological release, but it is devoid of spiritual, emotional, or relational content, the meaning that matters the most.

There are some immediate practical implications of these three verses: Sex should never be used as a bribe or reward for good behavior, or as something to be withheld as a threat or punishment. Husbands and wives alike need to be sensitive to their partner's emotional and physical conditions. They must not expect sex on demand, and on the other hand, they shouldn't consistently try to get out of satisfying the other's needs. In Ephesians 5:21 Paul talks about mutual submission in marriage. That applies to the marriage bed as much as to anything else in marriage.

THE DANGER OF SEXUAL DEPRIVATION IN MARRIAGE

Paul moves now to the second major point about growing in full sexual expression in marriage in verses 5-6. He warns of the danger of sexual deprivation.

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.

That imperative, "Stop depriving," literally means "Stop defrauding," or "Stop robbing." The word means to cheat somebody out of what is properly theirs. The only exception for sexual abstinence in marriage that Paul tolerates is very narrow, and it must meet three conditions: (1) Both parties must agree voluntarily, with no manipulation. (2) It's only for a short period of time. (3) It's spiritually driven, a provision for each partner to individually focus in a concentrated way on communion with the Lord for a time. But Paul does make it clear in verse 6 that this is not an apostolic directive, it's a concession.

The issue he raises about self-control assumes that the couple wouldn't have gotten married in the first place if they didn't feel any sexual desire. So they legitimately need to fulfill such desires for each other so they won't be tempted to commit adultery. Once again, listen to Peterson's paraphrase of these two verses:

"Abstaining from sex is permissible for a period of time if you both agree to it, and if it's for the purposes of prayer and fasting, but only for such times. Then come back together again. Satan has an ingenious way of tempting us when we least expect it. I'm not, understand, commanding these periods of abstinence, only providing my best counsel if you should choose them." (6)

You see, no spouse has the right to unilaterally shift into spiritual "hyper-drive" and deny their wife or husband lovemaking. Paul says that would be religious fraud. And if relational struggles disrupt the intimacy and openness that we enjoy physically, whether it's resentment, boredom, disappointment, tiredness, or disinterest, Paul's challenge in these verses is to face into the difficulty and deal with it. Don't deny it or avoid

it. Work together to solve the problem before Satan has a chance to begin destroying what God has joined together in the marriage union.

SEXUAL INTIMACY IN MARRIAGE IS A GIFT OF GOD

In verse 7 Paul offers the first hint of what will become clear in verses 8-9 about his own marital status. Paul is very helpfully self-disclosing in these last three verses. He says that we need to learn to accept sexual intimacy as a gift from God.

**Yet I wish that all men were even as I myself am.
However, each man has his own gift [grace] from God,
one in this manner [being single], and another in that [being married]."**

In verse 8 Paul says to the unmarried and the widows that it's good for them to remain "even as I." Paul is single at this stage of his life--and he likes it that way. He wishes that everybody could share the resistance to immoral sexual expression that he has committed himself to, and he wishes people could share his enjoyment of being single. But he realizes that only some people are gifted in that way, while other people are gifted with sexual expression in marriage. Again, listen to Peterson:

"Sometimes I wish everyone were single like me. A simpler life in many ways. But celibacy is not for everyone any more than marriage is. God gives the gift of single life to some, the gift of married life to others." (7)

In all probability, Paul had been married earlier in his life. Marriage was the norm for young Jewish men. They were expected to marry and then have children to propagate the race and the faith; to "be fruitful and multiply." Rabbis by and large were expected to be married. And we know from the book of Acts that Paul was a member of the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem before his conversion. That ruling body required that its members be married. So Paul was probably either widowed before this, or as some people conjecture, when he came to Christ his wife divorced him, she being a devout Jew. Either way, it is helpful to understand that Paul isn't writing about marriage as a dispassionate theological observer. He is not a crusty old bachelor who is anti-marriage. He is comfortable writing about marriage, family, and human sexuality, both from his experience as a married man and also as a single man.

Now, I know that some struggle to accept this idea that sex in marriage is a gracious gift of God. Cliff and Joyce Penner have a chapter in their book entitled "Why All the Confusion?" If it's such a wonderful gift, why are we so confused about it? They speak very compassionately in this chapter about the things that scar people--the early-childhood, adolescent, or young-adult experiences that can make it difficult to even hear and accept this kind of openness in Paul's words. They talk about how our homes and families may have been characterized by difficult negative things we heard and observed.

They tell about a woman who was raised in a small rural town in Wisconsin, who said that she received no instruction regarding sexual interaction until two weeks before she was married. At that point her mother took her aside and lovingly, caringly communicated three basic warnings. First, the honeymoon would be awful. Second, she should expect to be very tired. And third, she shouldn't let her husband use her.

They also talk about men who have come to them for counseling who grew up with a distaste bordering on disgust for physical intimacy; and about other men who were taught to dominate and control, who didn't know anything else to be but sexual abusers.

They talk about how mothers and fathers can either help or harm in what they model and how they talk.

They talk about the input of society. If there was a big controversy in your community about sex education when you were young, that would have left a mark on you in terms of how you view sexuality. Or if a close friend or relative became pregnant out of wedlock and you sat in on discussions of the situation as a child, that would affect your view of sexuality.

They talk about how the church too often is not a place to get help. Churches can have an austere, rigid attitude about dealing with issues of human sexuality. They humorously talk about the church where the pastor shows up once a year to give the youth his "keep thyself pure" talk, which is helpful as far as it goes, but it doesn't deal with the big picture.

They talk about childhood sexual experiences--molestation, kidnapping, premature introduction to sexual activity by a trusted family member or friend.

Early marital experiences themselves can be disappointing, painful, or frightening. Then when children come along, fatigue and heavier financial responsibilities can hinder sexual intimacy.

But this passage has been teaching us that God gifted us with sex in marriage for the pleasure and fulfillment of each partner. That is beautifully captured in the Song of Solomon, as we can see in verses 4:9-5:1:

**"You have made my heart beat faster, my sister, my bride;
You have made my heart beat faster with a single glance of your eyes,
With a single strand of your necklace.**

**How beautiful is your love, my sister, my bride!
How much better is your love than wine,
And the fragrance of your oils
Than all kinds of spices!**

**Your lips, my bride, drip honey;
Honey and milk are under your tongue,
And the fragrance of your garments is like the fragrance of Lebanon.**

**A garden locked is my sister, my bride,
A garden locked, a spring sealed up.
Your shoots are an orchard of pomegranates**

**With choice fruits, henna with nard plants,
Nard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon,
With all the trees of frankincense,
Myrrh and aloes, along with all the finest spices.**

**You are a garden spring,
A well of fresh water,
And streams flowing from Lebanon."**

**"Awake, O north wind,
And come, wind of the south;
Make my garden breathe out fragrance,
Let its spices be wafted abroad.**

**May my beloved come into his garden
And eat its choice fruits!"**

**"I have come into my garden, my sister, my bride;
I have gathered my myrrh along with my balsam.
I have eaten my honeycomb and my honey;
I have drunk my wine and my milk."**

This is a poem that Solomon wrote for his bride, the Shulammitte, about his memories of the beauty of the first experience of lovemaking. And at the end the Lord himself speaks into that setting a word of blessing and affirmation in 5:1:

**"Eat, friends;
Drink and imbibe deeply, O lovers."**

Our sexuality is God's work. The creation narratives in Genesis tell us, "...God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them...And God saw all He had made, and behold, it was very good." (Genesis 1:27, 31.)

FOR THE PREVIOUSLY MARRIED, THE QUESTION OF REMARRYING

Now in verses 8-9 Paul turns from the currently married to previously married people, those who have been divorced or widowed.

But I say to the unmarried and to 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.

For the previously married person, celibate chastity is best, but remarriage is better than continual struggle.

The word "unmarried" in verse 8 is a masculine plural word in the Greek, and the word "widows" is a feminine plural word. Later in the chapter, beginning in verse 25, Paul is going to address those single people who have never been married. Also, the more explicit Greek word for widower was falling into disuse in the first century. Therefore, we probably ought to understand "the unmarried" here to refer to either men whose wives have died or men who have been divorced.

Now, the super-spiritual people in the church in Corinth would be telling these divorced and widowed Christians never to remarry. And Paul doesn't totally disagree; he says this may be a good course of action--but not, clearly, if it leads to sexual immorality. Listen to Peterson's paraphrase of these two verses:

"I do, though, tell the unmarried and widows that singleness might well be the best thing for them, as it has been for me. But if they can't manage their desires and emotions, they should by all means go ahead and get married. The difficulties of marriage are preferable by far to a sexually tortured life as a single." (8)

Now, just to make the point that Paul is not anti-marriage even for the formerly married people, in 1 Timothy 5:14 Paul encourages young widows to remarry if that's possible in God's will. It's only the older widows who have lived a lot of life whom he says might be better off to stay single. Paul's counsel here in these two verses is very gracious and encouraging.

These last two verses reflect a balance that is crucially needed among Christian singles who have been previously married. Sadly, I've heard attitudes voiced, even in evangelical churches today, particularly among divorced people, that sex is their right but never again will they consider marriage. But according to the Scriptures, nobody can ever legitimately claim that sex outside of marriage is a right. And remarriage can be a good thing. It can be a crucial need, and not just so that the person can enjoy sexual intimacy once again. If you know any single parents, you know the kind of help they need in rearing children, earning additional income, and overcoming loneliness. Those are legitimate reasons, along with sexual intimacy, for getting remarried.

But none of those reasons, individually or collectively, is sufficient in itself to justify remarriage, because each of them views the new spouse as a means for meeting one's own needs. Remember Peterson's paraphrase: "Marriage is not a place to stand up for your rights. Marriage is a decision to serve the other, whether in bed or out." Only wholehearted commitment to the other person's well-being can lay an adequate foundation for a healthy marriage or a healthy remarriage.

Paul makes a simple distinction between those men and women who are able to live godly lives without a sexual relationship, and those who serve God better with that relationship, in marriage. Whichever is our way of life, married or single, we must live it the same way--in grateful dependence on God. Sexuality in marriage and learning how to live singly as a sexual person are gifts from God. In either state, the spiritual must govern the physical, because our bodies are God's temple. We are not our own, we're bought with a price. God's

desires for our sexual expression must be the ultimate concern. Dying to the selfish pursuit of my own rights and needs is what leads to fulfillment in life.

That's probably why, forty-three years ago, our elders mounted the cross in the center of the words "You are not your own, you are bought with a price" at the front of our auditorium. It's at the foot of the cross where we give up and say, "Lord, your will be done. I want what you know is best for me."

NOTES

1. Clifford and Joyce Penner, *The Gift of Sex: A Guide to Sexual Fulfillment*, © 1983, Word Books, Waco, Texas. P. 1.
2. Eugene Peterson, *The Message*, © 1993, NavPress, Colorado Springs, CO. P. 346.
3. HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION. © 1973, 1978, 1984 International Bible Society. Zondervan Bible Publishers, Grand Rapids, MI.
4. Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, © 1987, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI. P. 276.
5. Peterson, P. 346.
6. Peterson, P. 346-347.
7. Peterson, P. 347.
8. Ibid.

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