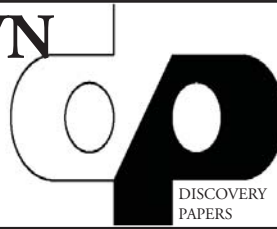


YOU ARE NOT YOUR OWN



SERIES: BODY. LIFE.

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1 Corinthians 7:1-7
2nd Message
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The Bible contains many stirring and beautiful texts that speak of marriage. However, the passage before us now—1 Corinthians 7:1-7—is not one of them. The instruction on marriage here is important and challenging, earthy and realistic, challenging to interpret—but not lyrical.

In this sermon series we are working our way through 1 Corinthians stopping at each point where the Greek word *soma* (body) is used. As in chapter 6, Paul uses *soma* in 7:1-7 to refer to ordinary human bodies and choices regarding sexuality.

1 Corinthians 7:1:

¹Now concerning the things about which you wrote, it is good for a man not to touch a woman.

We have previously noted that much of 1 Corinthians is Paul's response to questions or challenges that have been posed to him. Sometimes it is difficult to know when a phrase originates with him and when he is quoting his questioner before giving a response. Here the phrase, "it is good for a man not to touch a woman" is best read as a quotation from a letter written to him. The word 'touch' is a euphemism for sexual intercourse. The Corinthians had written Paul to ask about the advisability of celibacy, that is, under what circumstances is it good to avoid sexual intimacy?

1 Corinthians 7:2:

²But because of immoralities, each man is to have his own wife, and each woman is to have her own husband.

This is another interpretively difficult verse because it may seem that Paul is saying that everyone should be married, but he is not saying that. The phrase to "have your own wife" or to "have your own husband" is another euphemism for sexual relations. Celibacy has a place, as we will see, but not for marriage partners. Those who are married should make it a practice to "have" one another sexually.

1 Corinthians 7:3-6:

³The husband must fulfill his duty to his wife,

and likewise also the wife to her husband. ⁴The 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. ⁵Stop depriving one another, except by agreement for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer, and come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. ⁶But this I say by way of concession, not of command.

"Concession, not of command" has to do with the practice of mutually agreed upon 'isolation for the purpose of prayer'—an acceptable practice but not one the apostle insists on.

1 Corinthians 7:7:

⁷Yet 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.

Looking back we see that the down-to-earth perspective of chapter 7 is a long way from the final verses of chapter 6 which combined body-choices with worship: Your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit . . . honor God with your body. Chapter 7 continues without exalted language, giving answers to practical questions (e.g. choices facing widows and widowers, young people considering marriage during stressful times, a believer with an unbelieving spouse, etc.) without reference to invisible realities or attention to the presence of God.

Practical answers to 'how to live' questions will always need to take account of the conditions in the time and place where they are asked. In the Roman era, marriage patterns were different from our own. For them, little was expected in the way of romance or personal fulfillment. No one married their 'soul mate.' No one had a 'life partner.' Family life was difficult and husbands and wives were each expected to accomplish assigned tasks. These included having sex. Each spouse was to carry out his or her part in meeting the needs of the family. Women were often married to men older than themselves and had less status than their husbands. Sexually active, financially independent, socially approved-of single men and women were essentially unknown.

Further, we might note that the people to whom Paul is writing are first generation converts. Later, in more established churches Paul would write of beauty in marriage, of agape love, and mutual sacrifice, of imitating the relationship between Christ and the church (Eph. 5:21-33). The Ephesian marriages were formed in the context of the church, where God's presence elevated both expectations and experience. But circumstances were different for the recipients of 1 Corinthians. None of these people grew up in a Christian setting. None had ever seen a Christian marriage develop over time. They were new believers, many converted as already-married adults; mostly working-class men and women with very few expectations of 'emotional fulfillment' in their relationships.

With this background we return to the question of celibacy. Remember that Paul is answering questions that occur in the context in the Corinthian church. If he were alive today, we would ask different questions—including what is the best advice for non-married, financially independent single adults who don't believe they are called to sexual abstinence. This text doesn't address that question because the problem didn't exist in the apostle's day.

Let's first consider the instruction of v.7. Celibacy is a very good thing if you are single and gifted by God to stay single. Prostitution (see chapter 6) and adultery were forbidden among believers. Single and celibate, available for ministry was Paul's life pattern and he commends it to others. Paul sees the gift of singleness as offering greater opportunity for ministry (7:32-35). The church is the family of those who have neither spouse nor children. The believing community was to accept responsibility for the aged saints among them, especially those who lived honorable lives and chose to give themselves in service to Christ.

It may seem that singleness carries greater risk of isolation and loneliness in life. But in fact every believer must trust God to provide a place to belong and a calling to give oneself to. Many adults who marry live significant amounts of time in singleness prior to marriage or in widowhood. Some married couples are required by circumstances to spend long stretches of time apart from one another. Paul's statement, "I wish all men were as I am" is a declaration of spiritual and emotional maturity. As we grow more certain that Jesus will never leave or forsake us we can express gratitude for whatever family status he has assigned.

My wife's father, Fred Vann, was a remarkable man of God. He and Betty married in their twenties and raised two beautiful daughters (thank you, Lord). After Betty's death, Fred lived alone for some years, remarried, and was widowed a second time. Fred's life overflowed with friends,

ministry, interesting hobbies, worship, and delight in the world around him in all stages—married with his own kids, welcoming grandchildren, widowed, married, and widowed again. He was the same good man in each stage of life. Contentment comes from knowing that God is present and that he knows what life is best for us.

In verses 1-6 the question is not celibacy for single people, but for some who are presently married. Evidently there was a group in Corinth who believed life in Christ rendered the responsibilities of marriage unimportant, saying in effect, "I want to transcend my marriage. I want to step away from the grubby ordinariness of married life and move on to a higher plane." Holding this perspective are new converts who delighted in the wonder of God's presence, a community of joy, marvelous new truths, miracles, and ecstatic utterances filled with praise for God. Women for the first time were given a voice in a wider community, were allowed to think and speak for themselves. Ordinary men who labored hard in obscurity were now admired as teachers and leaders in Jesus' church. Married life, by contrast, seemed difficult, routine, and unrewarding. It is not hard to re-create their thoughts, "I'd rather be in a prayer meeting with brothers and sisters who understand me than home in bed with an unbelieving husband or wife who pays no attention at all." The apostle has been asked to agree with this point of view.

He emphatically refuses to do so. It is not okay to walk away from the marriage bed and from the routines of family life. His arguments are very practical. He mentions immorality in v.2 and temptation in v.5. Men and women who have had an active sex life (even with little romance) will be vulnerable to sexual temptation when they are separated and alone. New life in Christ is not an everlasting emotional high which denies the possibility of lustful thoughts. In addition, one must not cavalierly subject a spouse to lonely and tempting circumstances. In Corinth, these spouses were men and women who had not chosen to marry an excited Christian. Likely, they had their world rocked with no warning by their partner's conversion. Abandoning them does not honor God.

The phrase "fulfill your duty," is grating to modern sensibilities, isn't it? You have a duty to be the sexual intimate of your spouse. It's not very romantic. But the first recipients of this letter would not have reacted as we do. As we have noted, they did not have high expectations of emotional intimacy. However, life in Christ changes everything. The gospel sheds light into darkness and has re-acquainted humanity with the possibilities of oneness on all levels that once existed in Eden. Among believers agape love elevated women, made listening and serving, and sacrifice of oneself for another the expected pattern of Christian marriage.

Paul's language of sexual duty made sense in its context, but we are inheritors of a much better vision.

The word *soma*, which has drawn our attention to this text, is found in verse 4—a remarkable verse indeed.

1 Corinthians 7:4:

⁴The 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.

Two assertions are made here—one which challenged the familiar thinking of first century readers and one which challenges what is familiar to us.

Roman era readers would have been shocked by the equality Paul insists upon. Women are given rights equal to men with regard to sexual intimacy. They are to be listened to, appreciated, and their desires taken seriously. Modern readers will find the exaltation of other-centeredness to be arresting. We are surrounded by exhortations to please and pamper ourselves, to be especially attentive to our own sexuality. Paul, echoing the teaching of Jesus, calls us to give up our rights and seek to benefit another. At the end of chapter 6 the apostle declared that 'you are not your own' belonging to the Lord. Here he calls for marriage partners to view their bodies as belonging to their partners. Conspicuously absent is a call to make sure you get what you want for yourself.

We have noted that the questions Paul is responding to in chapter 7 are asked in a particular context. In Corinth there were advocates for celibacy in marriage who needed to be answered. Let's use our imagination to ask different questions, ones that might occur if Paul received letters from other settings. For instance, traditional tribal cultures might query the apostle about problems associated with dowries and polygamy. What questions would come from 21st century Californians?

Perhaps we'd ask about the notion that a person needs to be fully accomplished before considering marriage—finished with graduate school, traveled the world, launched a career, and become free of financial constraints. Marriage should be considered, we are told, when I have become as invulnerable to negative outcomes as I can be. And yet the strongest marriages are surely those in which real

vulnerabilities have been faced together, when each partner needs the other's help and both learn thankfulness in the process.

Another question we might pose to Paul concerns the 'search for the ideal partner.' Is it wise to spend a long time in deep introspection so that I can measure every suitor against a detailed list of how my needs should best be met? But who can measure up? And why would anyone looking for the 'ideal' ever choose a person as flawed as me?

Finally, we might ask about, the relentlessly sexualized culture we live in. Photoshopped images and accounts of extreme sexual experiences render ordinary human bodies a disappointment. How can we reject impossible fantasies and find delight in the real person whom God might give us?

Marriage, singleness, and families of every kind are challenging. The temptation to selfishness will appear in different garb in diverse cultures, but the problem of ingratitude is always the same. God knows what is best for me and he can be trusted. Peace of heart and contentment with my life circumstances come from learning to serve others (God first) not searching for what pleases me in the moment. May our community be a place of truth and healing that honors God and offers help to those in need.