

As we noted previously, chapter 7 introduces us to the second major section of 1 Corinthians, in which Paul answers questions sent to him by the church. The first of those questions, dealt with in chapter 7, has to do with matters relating to marriage. We overviewed this section last week, and now we begin to examine it more closely, starting with vv. 1–9.

## Celibacy and Marriage (7:1–9)

As was the case in 6:12–13, the quotation marks in the ESV suggest that the Corinthians were applying a slogan—perhaps something they had heard from Paul—in a wrong way. “It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman,” they claimed. If this was something they had heard from Paul, it was probably in the context of sexual immorality. Some of the Corinthians, however, seem to have applied it wrongly to the covenant marriage bond, and so Paul writes here to correct misconceptions.

### Celibacy Can Be Good (v. 1)

In the right context, “it is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.” Unless there is a lifelong, covenant commitment of two natural people of the opposite sex, it is commendable that no sexual intercourse take place. For those not in a biblical, covenant marriage, celibacy is good.

#### TO THINK ABOUT

The implications of Paul’s words here should be obvious, and yet they are somehow overlooked by so many (professing) Christians. If celibacy is “good” outside of a biblical marriage, how should Christians think about sex before marriage? What about cohabitation? Is it only the actual sexual act that needs to be avoided outside of marriage?

### Celibacy Can Be Dangerous (v. 2)

In v. 2, Paul contrasts celibacy with marriage. In other words, he only sees lasting celibacy to be a fitting situation outside of marriage. He assumes, as the Bible does throughout, that those who are not married are celibate. And he considers that to be a perfectly acceptable station in life.

Nevertheless, because humans are so prone to sexual temptation, he recognises that marriage is important for many—even most. Marriage is not a second-class status, to which those who cannot control their lusts are relegated, but is the beautiful context in which God has ordained the exercise of human sexuality. Paul has already dealt in chapter 6 with the danger of sexual immorality, and here he shows that God has provided a “solution” to it: biblical marriage.

### Celibacy Can Be Wrong (vv. 3–5)

But not only can celibacy be dangerous (i.e. leading into temptation); it can, in fact, be downright wrong. Within the context of biblical, covenant marriage, sexual expression, rather than celibacy, ought to be the norm. There are at least two reasons for this.

**1. Oneness.** Our text does not explicitly teach the idea of oneness, but it is implicitly assumed. Paul’s teaching here on marriage assumes Jesus’ own teaching, which itself is rooted in the Genesis account. In Mark 10:6–9, Jesus explicitly highlighted the importance of oneness within marriage.

#### TO THINK ABOUT

Explain the biblical teaching that, in marriage, “the two shall become one flesh,” so that “they are no longer two but one flesh” (Mark 10:8). In what sense do the two become one? In what way does sex within marriage highlight and illustrate this oneness?

**2. Service.** The beauty of marital oneness is maintained when each spouse puts the needs of the other before his or her own. The principle of sacrificial service in marriage applies as much to sex as it does to any other area of the marriage relationship. In a highly patriarchal society, in which male dominance was the norm and women’s needs and desires were rarely considered, this was radically progressive teaching.

**TO THINK ABOUT**

How would you respond, in light of this text, to the idea that the Bible’s perspective on sex is limited to its procreational function? Must every act of intimacy between husband and wife be for the purpose of, or at least open to the possibility of, childbearing?

Christians are often accused of maintaining a highly prudish view of human sexuality, but this text encourages regular sexual activity within the confines of marriage. Stephen Um notes, “To the ascetic who views frequent marital sexual activity as less than holy, Paul’s counterargument is that married couples should have regular sex in order to remain holy.”

**TO THINK ABOUT**

Does this text intend to teach that a spouse can under no circumstances, other than prayer, refuse sex to his or her partner? Explain.

**Celibacy is Not for All (vv. 6–9)**

Paul’s words about the goodness of sex were not meant as a command to everyone. Marriage may be the blessed norm for man-woman relationships, but it is not required for believers or for anyone else. If you are married (or get married), stay married and retain normal marital relations. That is God’s will for those who are married. But if you are single, you are not outside of God’s will for your life. Spiritual health is not determined by marital status.

Paul argues here, as he will later in this chapter, that singleness does present certain privileges that marriage does not. While marriage is a good gift from God, it does limit, at least to some degree, the freedom and independence that a believer has to wholeheartedly serve God. But that freedom and independence is not to be pursued at all costs: Singleness is a gift from God.

**TO THINK ABOUT**

MacArthur writes, “Just as it is wrong to misuse a gift that we have, it is also wrong to try to use a gift we do not have.” How might those sentiments apply to Paul’s words here?

In vv. 8–9, Paul addresses some words to “the unmarried” and to “widows.” In v. 25, he will add a third category of singles: “the betrothed” (“virgins” in the NKJV). It has been argued by some linguists that the Greek term translated “unmarried,” which is used only four times in the New Testament, and all four in this chapter, is a technical term referring to those who were once married but became “unmarried” through divorce. (The Greek word is simply the word for marriage [“*gamos*”] with the negative prefix “*a*” attached to it. It is used in v. 11 specifically of one who has been divorced.) It is possible, then, that Paul is saying that the divorced and widowed are free to be remarried if they cannot exercise sexual self-control. If these interpreters are correct, however, Paul’s instruction that those divorced are free to remarry must be tempered with his teaching in vv. 10–16 and Jesus’ teaching on divorce.

Other interpreters argue that “the unmarried” is simply a broad term to describe any who are not bound by the married state.

Even if we cannot settle the precise identity of “the unmarried,” the point is clear: It is better to enter into marriage than to try and remain in an unmarried state and yet be unable to control sexual desire. “It is better to marry than to burn with passion.” It is difficult to live a fulfilled life, much less to serve the Lord, if you are continually burning with sexual desire.

**TO THINK ABOUT**

While Paul does not directly address this issue, how might his caution against “burning with passion” inform the decisions of an engaged couple as to how long to remain engaged before getting married?