

Prayers

Opening prayer

Great and mighty Lord, Your extraordinary power is shown not simply by miraculous events and great deeds, but by the way You help us deal with the troubles and distress of everyday life. You are constantly at work, encouraging us through those we know and love, healing us in mind and spirit as well as in body, and inspiring us by Your Word and Your Wisdom. Do Your work in us we pray, and may we never fail to be Your agents of peace and love in this troubled world: AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas_(Alternatives that can broaden the experience of prayer)

Ask the Lord for healing, both for the healing of your physical body and also your mind and your spirit. Ask the Lord to make you 'whole', and 'complete' in Him.

On-going prayers

- **Pray about air we breathe.** Pray for the airline industry, which depends on the air in our atmosphere, and has to take responsibility for pollution.
- Give thanks to God for animal life, and in particular any pets or animals with which you have close contact.
- Pray about the unfolding scandal of 'phone-tapping' involving news organisations, centred in the UK but affecting many news organisations across the world including the USA

Meditation

Breathe on us, Holy Spirit; breathe.

So we may feel that rush of air which comes from You,
And breathe more deeply of the things of God.

So we may seize the unconditional love of Jesus Christ,
Which does away with all the stress of living.

So we may accept the challenges of the Spirit's power,
To achieve the impossible within this world.

So we may take the gifts God gives us unconditionally,
The guarantee of faith and means of ministry.

So we may be blessed by the attention of the Holy Spirit,
And know the healing presence of our Maker.

So we may wonder at the mysteries of His power
Which point to what is greater than ourselves.

Breathe on us, Holy Spirit; breathe.

Bible Study

Bible passage – 1 Corinthians 7:1-7

¹ Now, regarding the matters about which you wrote: 'Is it right that a man should not touch a woman?'

² Well, because of all the sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman should have her own husband. ³ The husband should give to his wife her marital rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. ⁴ For the wife is not the owner of her own body, but the husband; likewise, the husband is not the owner of his own body, but the wife.

⁵ Do not refuse one another, except only for a limited time by mutual agreement to devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you through lack of self-control. ⁶ I say this as a concession, and not as a command. ⁷ For I wish that all men were as I am, myself; but each has his own gift from God, one having one kind and another, a different kind.

Review

After all the difficulties we have read about so far in 1 Corinthians, it is a delight to read a passage in which Paul speaks positively. The difficulties found in chapters 5 and 6 about sexual immorality are put to one side, and this reading today offers positive teaching about sex and marriage.

Verse one tells us that the Corinthians had become uncertain about how Christians should deal with matters of sex, so alongside all the other questions they had put to him (see also 7:25, 8:1, 12:1, 16:1, 16:12), they asked, *'is it right that a man should not touch a woman?' (7:1)*. Perhaps those in the church who had been scandalised by sexual immorality amongst its members had taken a hard line, and they therefore advocated complete abstinence. We do not know sure, but the question asked of Paul certainly enquires whether Christians should engage in sex at all, given that it caused such problems and was the root of much sin.

This passage of Scripture is sometimes misunderstood, for even though Paul writes positively about the marriage relationship and sex, he ends with what seems to be a caution. In verse 7, he describes his advice about marriage as a concession not a command, and adds, *'for I wish that all men were as I am, myself'*. We assume that Paul, as a single man, was being rather dismissive of the importance of sexual matters. However, we do not know for sure whether Paul was single, married or separated. Moreover, we should note his more positive comments in verse 7, where he describes someone's marital status, whatever it is, as a gift of God to be treasured. This is consistent with nearly all other Scriptural teaching about marriage (Gen 2:21-24, Proverbs 5:18f, Matt 19:1-12).

To return to the beginning of the text, most readers will spot that Paul quickly takes the opportunity given him to speak positively about marriage and sex. Whilst some in the Corinthian church thought sexual immorality a problem too big to overcome, Paul's approach is profoundly practical. Much to the benefit of us all, he advocates the plain common sense of fidelity within marriage. Moreover, he says plainly that sex is a proper and necessary part of marriage; it is an important point, even though he says it without any drama.

Paul was of course speaking to people in the first century who had a very different understanding of marriage to that we hold today. In those days, men were dominant and women were subservient, and all too often, men regarded women as their property and little more. Indeed, the question put to Paul, *'is it right that a man should not touch a woman' (7:1)* addresses issues of sex from a man's point of view, and we might expect Paul to reflect this bias. But contrary to what we might think, he purposefully talks about husband and wife as equals! In verses 2, 3 and 4, what he says of the husband he says equally of the wife, and what he says of the wife he says equally of the husband!

It remains important for Christians to realise that when the Bible is studied properly, it is found not to be prejudiced against women. From the standpoint of the days in which it was written, and therefore in all that it has to say now, the Bible encourages us to embrace the equality of the sexes. There are indeed a number of difficult texts appearing to say otherwise (e.g. 1 Tim 2:9-15), but if we look at these with care, we will find that God is never found to be impartial.

Alongside this most important point, Paul says more here about marriage and sex. Firstly, the idea of mutual ownership found in verse 4 is a remarkable illustration of the marriage relationship; husband and wife do not 'own' their own bodies, they are responsible for each other (7:4). Secondly, Paul commands husband and wife not to *'refuse one another' (7:5)*. Of itself, this command reflects the true interdependence of those who are one in marriage, and also the genuinely sharing nature of love that binds a man and woman together in marriage. Lastly, Paul suggests that abstinence from sex is an appropriate form of devotion within marriage (7:5), but as ever, he is conscious of Satan's power to manipulate sex. He would rather husband and wife be fulfilled than pursue their devotion to any extreme limit, for example, in giving up sex altogether.

All in all, there is much good teaching within this passage. It is positive and challenging teaching, and we cannot come away from it and say that Paul was either prudish or negative about marriage or sex.

Going Deeper

- Notes on the translation of this passage
- Views about marriage in Roman times
- Women in the writing of Paul
- Why have an exclusive marriage relationship? (7:2,3)
- Giving and receiving in sex (7:3,4)
- Abstaining from sex (7:5f.)
- Was Paul married or not?

Notes on the translation of this passage

V1 'Is it right for a man not to touch a woman?'

There are two important words in this passage; '*right*' and '*touch*'. Firstly, it is relatively clear from the context that to '*touch*' a woman was a euphemism for sexual intercourse, but it is hardly worth saying anything more than '*touch*' here, because this is fairly obvious. Secondly, the word '*right*' translates a Greek word '*kalon*' meaning '*good*'. Because '*good*' can have a moral tone in English, it is best if we avoid it here, because the context does not imply any moral judgement.

In addition to the words in this verse, you may notice that I have written this comment by Paul in the form of a question, whereas most translations you will have come across present it as a statement. There is no easy explanation to this, but the Greek could equally be a question or a statement. Others prefer the statement, but I suggest that our understanding of what Paul says here is served best if we think of it as a question (see study).

V3 'should give to his wife her marital rights'

It sounds a fairly cold way of speaking about sex within marriage, but this is what is meant. The Greek, literally, says that in a marriage relationship a woman should be '*given what is her due*', and as this verse says, the other way round, equally.

V4 'for the wife is not the owner of her body.'

The Greek talks about having '*authority*' over one's body like that of an owner. It is difficult to express this, and many translations opt for '*the wife does not have authority over her body*'. I have preferred to talk in terms of ownership because this is what is implied by the text, and it leads naturally to a good interpretation of the passage.

V6 'I say this as a concession, and is not as command.'

The interesting word in this sentence is '*concession*'. The Greek word is a little obscure, and indicates something that is commonly accepted by people, and therefore not a matter of '*law*'. The trouble we have is that we think of a '*concession*', as something given begrudgingly, and therefore of less importance. I do not believe this is the case here. It means simply that Paul thinks it common sense that sexual practice in marriage should be normal, and any abstinence should not be for too long.

Views about marriage in Roman times

What was happening in the church at Corinth reflected the general opinions and attitudes within the Roman world of the day, even though they had come to know Christ. In those days, the philosophical world was split between the Cynics and the Stoics. On the subject of sex and marriage, some Cynics had little regard for marriage, and advised the use of prostitution as a means of dealing with sexual urges. This approach reflects male domination in sexual matters, and assumes there will always be women available for sex. On the other hand, Stoics emphasised the value of marriage to the state, largely in terms of providing the right numbers of people for the right positions within society. As an example of Stoicism, the Emperor Augustus, instituted a system of tax rebates and incentives to ensure that widowed women (bereaved because their husbands has been killed in the army) quickly married again to perform their duty of providing more children and a future generation of leaders and aristocracy!

Women in the writing of Paul

In his day Paul's views would have been regarded as closer to those of the ideas Stoics though the Cynics, but he would have disdained such a connection. His views were influenced more by Scripture (e.g. Genesis 2:20-24)! Stoics would not have given any rights to women, as Paul does, and as is found throughout most of Scripture (7:2-5, 11:11,12, Eph 5:21-25). In his remarks elsewhere about '*headship*' (see 1 Cor 11:3f.) and the place of women in the church and home (e.g. Eph 5:21f. 1 Tim 2:9f.), it seems that Paul gives women a subordinate place to men. All of these texts are highly debatable, but they are all about social order, they are not about marriage. In this passage Paul talks about the very nature of the marriage relationship, and he does so in a purely egalitarian manner.

Why have an exclusive marriage relationship? (7:2,3)

Paul does not write about the exclusivity within a marriage relationship (7:2,3) in abstract. He advocates this for one reason, which is so that men and women have a clear avenue for their sexual urges, and avoid sexual immorality (7:2). This seems a rather worldly reason for something that is essentially good, but Paul would have been aware of old Testament Scriptures (Genesis 1:26, 27, 2:20-24) that taught equality within marriage, and would have assumed it. Nevertheless, Paul was deeply aware of the power of sexual urges, something that has perhaps only been openly discussed within society in recent decades. He was willing to make a clear stance say that sex, just like any other natural gift, was capable of being used both for good and for ill. It was his observation that when people succumb to sexual urges outside of marriage, the result is never does, as is contrary to God's desires and plan for the individual. Our passage here does not discuss every possible aspect of sexual desire or relationship, but it lays a foundation for making moral judgements about sexual matters.

Giving and receiving in sex (7:3,4)

There is a small word within verse 3 of great importance, for Paul says, *'the husband should give to his wife her marital rights ...'* Here, marital rights means sexual rights, in its coarsest sense, but note carefully what the verses says. The husband's duty is to 'give' himself for the satisfaction of his wife's sexual expectations and desires, and vice versa. The closer we look at this the more we will realise that sexual satisfaction is defined by Paul here not so much as achieving the satisfaction of one's own desires, but by being fully involved in giving satisfaction to the other, in this case the marriage partner. This idea is unique, and quite frankly, not found anywhere else in the first century literature. Indeed, Paul has the audacity to turn the world of male domination on his head! The man is obliged to act in response to his wife's sexual rights, and likewise the wife to her husband!

Firstly, this establishes without a shadow of a doubt the equality of men and women in matters of sex, and secondly, it makes it absolutely clear that sex is primarily a matter of giving before it is a matter of receiving. Much modern understanding of sex focuses upon what individual partners receive from each other, but this is quite different and it is not what the Bible says here. Paul teaches that God's purpose of sex is mutual giving and receiving.

Verse 4 continues the theme strongly, as Paul speaks about the 'body'. He says, to put it in other words, that the body of a woman is owned by her husband and the body of a man is owned by his wife. Now remember, Paul had just spoken to the church at Corinth about the fact that together, the body of Christians are a *'temple of the Holy Spirit'* (6:19), meaning that our bodies are in this sense not our own but God's. Coming one after another, these two passages of Scripture are a fundamental challenge to the view that we own our bodies! They reinforce the general teaching of Scripture that contrary to popular opinion, it is only in giving ourselves to others that we find fulfilment.

Abstaining from sex (7:5f.)

5, adds one other small but significant point. It appears that some people made a practice of praying and fasting, probably concerning the Lord's imminent return. As part of this, it was common for people to make a vow of abstinence from sex. The origins of this for people either of Jewish descent or who knew the Old Testament, lay in the requirements of the laws of Moses for those doing the Lord's special work to refrain from sex. Soldiers had to refrain from sex before battles whilst on active duty (see 2 Sam 11:11, for example). Whilst Paul would not have wished to place limits on people's private devotional activity, his advice here is a compromise between the value of special private devotion which required such restraint, and the need for mutuality and regularity in sex and the relationship of marriage. He advised that refraining from sex should not be done unilaterally by men, but only 'by mutual agreement' and for prayer. Paul knew full well that if men and women who were married dropped their sexual relationship for other reasons, Satan would strike(7:5).

Was Paul married or not?

At the end in verse 7, we gain a glimpse not so much of Paul's theological opinions and arguments, but of the person. As far as we know, Paul was unmarried when he went on his missionary journeys. There is some debate about whether he was married at one stage in his life, and we do not know whether this is correct or what happened to his wife if he was married. However, Paul speaks here as he does elsewhere about his own call to celibacy and the fact that he regarded his own state of celibacy as preferable for one in Christian service. However, Paul makes the point but never presses it, always saying that God has different gifts for different people, as he does here (7:7).

Discipleship

Application

Marriage today

The only way we can apply this text today is to advocate marriage and the practice of sex exclusively within it. If what Paul said was shocking in his day, then it continues to hold a few surprises for people today. Marriage preparation is often required by clergy if they are to marry people in the church, and having seen the courses available, they teach mainly about personal responsibility within marriage, finance, sexual responsibility and the duties of parenting, honouring God in the home, and more. I would suggest that a thorough study of this passage of scripture would not go amiss, because I am not convinced that most who marry today, even in church, have as egalitarian a view of marriage and sex as is contained within this text.

Here are some points worth considering by a husband and wife:

- Reflect on the idea that a husband or wife might 'own' the other's body, and the idea that people are fulfilled not in satisfying their own sexual urges but in satisfying the sexual feelings and expectations of a loved one.
- Reflect on the significance of abstaining from sexual activity for a period of time for the purpose of prayer, some may do this, but I have never heard this advocated or taught!

Here are some points worth considering by young people who are not married

- What does it mean to keep sex entirely within marriage, and why is this necessary? What the Bible teach about this elsewhere?
- What does the Bible mean by teaching that a man and a woman find their satisfaction and their fulfilment in each other? Why should this be important?

Questions for groups

1. Is the subject of sex and sexual practice, within or outside of marriage discussed or preached upon in your church? If so, for what reason, and does it relate to this text?
2. Is Paul's advice attainable or unobtainable? How can the church help people for whom this passage of Scripture speaks of ideals that are unobtainable?
3. What are the merits of the gifts of marriage, and what are the merits of the gift of celibacy? Which best suit Christian ministry?

Discipleship challenges

- *How does this passage of scripture affect you as a single or a married person? Which part of the teaching is particularly important for you and something from which you need to learn? Read the passage carefully and respond to its challenges as you believe right before God.*
- *Pray for those who struggle with sexual relationships for whatever reason, and bring before the Lord any people you know who are worried about their 'sexuality' or who find it hard to control their sexual urges. Pray against the power of Satan to hold people through pornography.*

Final Prayer

Dear Lord and Father, bless your people today in marriage. Strengthen those who have found themselves blessed in marriage and seek to live according to Your Word, and help all those who aspire to find godly marriage relationships. Help all who struggle with sexual matters, within or outside of marriage, and heal the hurts created by sin. We ask this in Your name Lord Jesus, AMEN
