

“Concerning the Things Whereof Ye Wrote unto Me”

Concerning Marriage

1 Corinthians 7:1-9

Chapter seven, although a continuation, in part, to the previous two chapters in the issue of sexual immorality, begins a series of answers to specific questions that Paul was asked in a letter that was written and sent to him from the church in Corinth.

With this chapter commences a new section of the Epistle; the topics, and perhaps their order, suggested by a letter of formal inquiry brought from Corinth: vii. Marriage; viii. Things offered to Idols; ix. Support of Ministry; x. Lord’s Supper and Love-feast; xi. Women in Public Services, Lord’s Supper; [x., xi. Public Worship, sundry topics connected with;] xii. Spiritual Gifts; (xiii. parenthetic, “Charity”;) xiv. Spiritual Gifts resumed; xv. The Resurrection. (Preacher’s Homiletical Commentary)

As will be seen, the first question he answers (whether they were given in this order in the original letter we cannot be certain) is that regarding marriage and how (initially anyways) it applies to the greater context of the previous two chapters in relation to sexual immorality. It seems that he leads up to this answer with giving some very important foundational principles first.

The first question could be asked from the perspective of a single person – “Is single life wrong?” The question was asked apparently from the other perspective – “Is being married wrong?” The answer to both questions is answered here –

and it is a simple and emphatic, "No."

"Their impurity in sexual matters was rampant, and evidently the question had arisen among these Christian people as to whether, in view of these evil condition, it were not good to remain unmarried. That is the plain question, in the plain language of our own time, that they had written and asked. In view of all these conditions, would it not be safer to remain unmarried?" (G. Campbell Morgan)

With the attack on marriage that is prevalent today, and with the seeming complete disregard for the sanctity of the marriage bed, Paul answers the question regarding marriage verses being single with some fairly clear directives.

One thing to remember as we study this chapter is that this is not the ultimate and final word on marriage (Eph. 5 gives more detail on marriage). This is given as an answer in response to a specific question in a specific place at a specific time. Yes, there are clear principles to see here that will help us understand the biblical teaching on marriage, but we need to remember that this is not the final word, nor an all-encompassing teaching. This text needs to be taught in accordance with other passages on marriage (Jesus's teaching on marriage in Matthew, Paul's teaching in Ephesians, etc.). What is found here is some basic principles to follow.

Dr. Kenneth Chafin in his commentary on 1 Corinthians found in *The Preacher's Commentary*, writes this on this chapter: We need to remember some things that are very elemental in all interpretation of the Scripture passages. First, Paul was not writing a general treatise on marriage. He was answering very specific questions which had been asked of him.

Second, we must understand his answers in terms of some of the very twisted views that some of his readers had about marriage. Third, we have to isolate from the whole situation those aspects which were obviously local and temporary. Fourth, all that he said to them must be interpreted in the light of the feelings that he had about the imminent return of Christ to the earth and the inevitability of persecution in the days ahead. Finally, we need to realize that it was not possible for Paul to respond to their questions except in the light of his own personal experience with marriage. All of the above needs to be kept in mind, or we will find ourselves using this passage as "proof-text" for something that does not seem in tune with the rest of Scripture.

I. BASIC PRINCIPLES OF BIBLICAL MARRIAGE – VS. 1-2 (SPECIFICALLY, VERSE TWO)

A. The simple, basic premise established in these verses is that established at the very beginning of creation – one man, one woman for life (seen in verse two).

Genesis 2:24

²⁴ Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh.

B. A second basic principle established here (and further developed in the next point) is that the only time an intimate relationship should take place is within marriage. That is the only time allowed by God as established in Scripture. That means any sexual relationship outside of marriage goes against Scripture.

C. Verse one is a verse that often is taken out of the context for which it is meant and used in a much wider sense than intended – “it is good for a man not to touch a woman.”

1. Let me say at the outset here, this has nothing to do with shaking hands or hugging a lady as a means of greeting or kindness. There is other evidence in Scripture to show that is not what is meant here. For instance, 1 Cor. 16:20; 2 Cor. 13:12; and 1 Thess. 5:26 all say, “Greet one another with an holy kiss” (or some variation thereof). 1 Peter 5:14 says, “Greet ye one another with a kiss of charity.”
2. The words “it is” are in italics in some older English versions and they are that because there is no word in the Greek to correspond to them. They were added for clarity by the translators. The literal translation simply states “good for a man...” – it’s an adjective describing the principle.
3. The word for “good” (καλός) is one that means “expedient generally: more for a man’s best interests under present circumstances” (Henry Alford quoting Jerome). The present circumstances of Corinth, and those within the church, was one of rampant sexual immorality (fornication). Paul, in answer to the question that had been posed to him on how to deal with this issue was that it was best for them at that time to abstain from

anything that would lead to fornication.

Dr. Wuest interprets it as this: "It is perfectly proper, honorable, morally befitting..."

4. "For a man" – this is gender specific based on the context of the previous two chapters, but the principle behind this point is found later in the chapter to apply to women as well.
5. "Not to touch a woman"
 - a) The word for "touch" (ἀπτομαι) comes from one (ἀπτω) that means to handle an object so as to exert a modifying influence upon it, to fasten to (Zodhiates). Thayer and others have it as to set fire to, to kindle, to light. As used here, there is universal understanding of this as a euphemism for sexual relations outside of marriage (as the context would dictate).

A term of modesty to express any contact with sexual purpose or feeling (Daniel Whedon).

Genesis 20:4

⁴ But Abimelech had not **come near** her: and he said, Lord, wilt thou slay also a righteous nation?

Genesis 20:6

⁶ And God said unto him in a dream, Yea, I know that thou didst this in the integrity of thy heart; for I also withheld thee from sinning against me: therefore suffered I thee not **to touch** her.

- b) Some teach this whole passage as it's

better to NOT marry than to marry – to remain celibate. That is not what is taught, nor is that even Scriptural. The only time that is better is if God has given that “gift,” as it is called later in the chapter, to someone for the purpose of greater service for the Lord in a capacity that being single would have greater influence. In fact, Paul teaches that to forbid someone from marrying is a “doctrine of devils.”

1 Timothy 4:1-3

¹ Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils;

² Speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron;

³ Forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from meats, which God hath created to be received with thanksgiving of them which believe and know the truth.

- c) The consensus by most translators (and this is seen in almost all modern versions of the Bible) is that Paul is teaching in this point, as well as throughout the chapter, that it’s best to not be married, or at the very least, not to have sexual relations with a woman. It may be true that he is saying that is “good” – maybe even better or best under certain circumstances – but he is in no way saying that is the answer for all. Here’s how some of the more egregious and dangerous translations of this verse in modern versions:

(1) *The BBE (Bible in Basic English)* – “It is good for a man to have nothing to do with a woman” – that is about as bad a

translation as could be done with this text;

(2) *The CEV (Contemporary English Version) is better but puts this as the question that was asked of Paul when it was the answer he was giving to the question – “Is it best for people not to marry?”*

(3) *The ISV (International Standard Version) has a similar question – “Is it advisable for a man not to marry?” Again, showing that they interpret it as the question rather than the answer, which the greater portion of the context clearly indicates it is.*

- d) The ESV (and others) seem to connect this properly, and use what is referred to by some as a Jewish euphemism (a mild or indirect word or expression substituted for one considered to be too harsh or blunt when referring to something unpleasant or embarrassing) - Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: “It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.”
- e) The Apostle is simply saying that there is nothing wrong with living in celibacy, with restricting oneself to service to the Lord without any hinderance by marital status. And, as will be seen, in the case of those in the church that were struggling with the world, this was actually the best course for them. But that is not true of all those that serve the Lord, and he makes that clear.

D. Verse two gives that basic principle of “one man, one woman for life” in marriage.

1. "Nevertheless" – often translated "but" – in this case, the word "nevertheless" carries a better understanding in this context. It is "strictly adversative, but more frequently denoting transition or conversion, and serving to introduce something else, whether opposed to what precedes or simply continuative or explanatory" (Zodhiates). What follows does not negate what was before (which the word "but" often points to); what follows in this case clarifies and adds to what is before. "Considering the principle of celibacy for some (vs. 1), it is not for everyone and for those that would be in danger of fornication (sexual immorality), it is better to be married" (my reading – not a quote of someone else).

The former course is expedient – would avoid much trouble 'in the flesh:' but as a general rule *it may not be*, seeing that for a *more weighty reason* the contrary course is to be recommended (Greek Testament Critical Exegetical Commentary).

2. The words "to avoid" are in italics in the KJV to help facilitate the reading but the corresponding word in the Greek (διὰ) carries the idea of "because of" or "on account of." It is because of the lifestyle of wickedness that was being lived in Corinth that this issue even came up, and to avoid that lifestyle, it was better they married if they could not live pure and holy.
3. "Fornication" ("immoralities" in the NASB)

- this is plural in the Greek - "[T]he many instances of fornication current. The plural of an abstract noun implies repetition, or varieties of the occurrence" (Alford).

4. "Let every man have his own wife, and let every woman have her own husband."

a) This was given to refute the notion that some had (and some even today have) that, although the passage was written to married people, they were to refrain from having intimate relations (remain celibate) even though they were married.

b) There are two different Greek words used in this verse for the word "own"

(1) His own wife (ἑαυτοῦ) - properly belonging to himself in marriage (Heinrich Meyer)

(2) Her own husband (ἰδιος) - speaks to relationship rather than ownership.

(3) These two speak particularly to polygamy, showing it was not to be done, as well as having intimate relations outside of marriage.

(4) "The variation [in the terms] distinguishes the husband as head and principal" (The Expositor's Greek Testament - W. Robertson Nicol).

c) John Gill: Let every man that has a wife enjoy her, and make use of her, and let every woman that has an husband, receive him into her embraces; for these words are not to be understood of unmarried persons entering into a marriage state, for the

words suppose them in such a state, but of the proper use of the marriage bed; and teach us that marriage, and the use of it, are proper remedies against fornication; and that carnal copulation of a man with a woman ought only to be of husband and wife, or of persons in a married state; and that all other copulations are sinful; and that polygamy is unlawful; and that one man is to have but one wife, and to keep to her; and that one woman is to have but one husband, and to keep to him.

Conclusion: The basic principle of marriage – the principle upon which all else is built – is that found in Genesis, and carried throughout Scripture (although there are those that violated this principle and still were used of God) is one man, one woman, for life.

With the attack on marriage from so many directions, it is necessary we get back to the basics.

The evidence is convincing that the better our relationships are at home, the more effective we are in our careers. If we're having difficulty with a loved one, that difficulty will be translated into reduced performance on the job. In studying the millionaires in America (U.S. News and World Report), a picture of the "typical" millionaire is an individual who has worked eight to ten hours a day for thirty years and is still married to his or her high school or college sweetheart. A New York executive search firm, in a study of 1365 corporate vice presidents, discovered that 87% were still married to their one and only spouse and that 92% were raised in two-parent families. The evidence is overwhelming that the family is the strength and foundation of

society. Strengthen your family ties and you'll enhance your opportunity to succeed.

Source: Zig Ziglar in *Homemade*, March 1989

II. BASIC PRINCIPLES WITHIN MARRIAGE – VS. 3-6

A. Mutual compassion – vs. 3

1. The overall consensus with this verse is that it is speaking to the intimate relationship within marriage. That may be the primary focus but that is not the entirety of the focus.
2. The word “render” is one that means to give what is due or owed (it is used in a variety of ways in the New Testament). It speaks to the marriage vows as something each spouse agrees to, and also goes to Genesis where it states that the two become one (Gen. 2:23-25).
3. “Due benevolence”
 - a) The Critical Text of the New Testament does not have the Greek word translated “benevolence” – it only has the word for “due,” and is sometimes translated “debt.”
 - b) However, as Dr. Peter Masters (pastor of Metropolitan Tabernacle) so eloquently states: “The word ‘due’ literally refers to a debt due for payment, or a duty. What is owed is benevolence, a word missing from some ancient manuscripts, but firmly included in the Majority Text, and the Received Text of the Greek New Testament. Some modern versions of the Bible hasten to omit the word, with their

tendency to 'dumb down' their rendering. By doing so they can make the entire passage speak about sex and sexual relationships. The world (and the tabloids) when it talks about marriage, tends to talk only about sex, but the Bible talks about more profound matters also. It is so in this seventh chapter of 1 Corinthians, where the apostle does not come to sexual relationships until after he has spoken about husband and wife possessing each other, and paying a mutual debt of benevolence. The inspired Word puts these important and precious things right at the beginning, because marriage is far more than a sexual relationship, important as that may be."

- c) The words mean a debt of goodwill, or kindness in action. Again, as Dr. Masters says: "The New King James Version keeps the idea of benevolence, except that it weakens the word a little, substituting 'affection'. That is not quite strong enough, because affection can be only an emotion, but benevolence is emotion actively expressed in kind deeds."
4. There is more to this than many teach – it is more than just that intimate relationship within marriage. Husbands and wives have a mutual responsibility to pay the debt that is owed each other (equally) of kindness in every aspect. Paul deals with a specific aspect as it related to the overall question answered in this passage as to whether a man or woman should abstain from intimate relations even within marriage, but the way this is worded indicates he had in mind much more than that.

Albert Barnes gives a great explanation here: "Let them not imagine that there is any virtue in bring separate from each other, as if they were in a state of celibacy" - "Doddridge." They are bound to each other; in every way they are to evince kindness, and to seek to promote the happiness and purity of each other. There is a great deal of delicacy used here by Paul, and his expression is removed as far as possible from the grossness of pagan writers. His meaning is plain; but instead of using a word to express it which would be indelicate and offensive, he uses one which is not indelicate in the slightest degree.

B. Mutual control – vs. 4

1. Within the marriage relationship there is a mutual control that the husband and wife have over one another. This, again, points to the issue of benevolence and kindness in action, and how each spouse has a say in what the other does.
2. Keep in mind, this text is not an all-encompassing teaching on the subject of marriage, but is simply giving basic principles, and dealing with a very narrow scope of application.
3. There are other texts to show the order of authority in the home and this text does not supersede those, nor does it negate them. The husband is the head of the home, and as such will be held accountable by God for what happens in

the home. Too many times, though, husbands carry that to an extreme God never intended – this text helps keep the focus where it is supposed to be. Peter says that the wife is a “weaker vessel,” and the husband is to treat her accordingly – not bully and abuse because they feel that God has made them superior.

1 Peter 3:7

⁷ Likewise, ye husbands, dwell with them according to knowledge, giving honour unto the wife, as unto the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life; that your prayers be not hindered.

Ephesians 5:22–28

²² Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord.

²³ For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body.

²⁴ Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing.

²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it;

²⁶ That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word,

²⁷ That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish.

²⁸ So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself.

4. The word for “power” here is one that means to have or exercise power in the sense of permitting (Zodhiates). The husband surrenders authority of his body to his wife, and the wife to her husband (in context, specifically speaking of the intimate relationship within marriage). This, again, points back to the basic principles of marriage (one man, one man for life; and that intimacy is only to be done within marriage) and the surrendering of one to the other.

C. Mutual consent – vs. 5-6

1. This verse makes clear the particular issue within the marriage vows that Paul is addressing. It goes back to the issue of fornication in the church and in the culture and brings the issue of faithfulness to God and His service, and faithfulness within marriage into focus.
2. The simple truth is, one of the purposes of marriage is that intimate relationship (sex, if you would). It isn't sinful – it is given to us by God as a gift – but, as this text clearly teaches, only within marriage.
3. “Defraud ye not”
 - a) Goes back to the word “render” in verse three – we are not to deprive our spouse what belongs to them (specifically, now, the intimate relationship).
 - b) That said, as it shows here, that relationship is to be consensual, even within marriage.

- c) This is dealing with that original question of celibacy (even within marriage) asked by the church in trying to understand how to deal with the pervasive influence of the Corinthian culture on the church at the time. Paul clearly says that celibacy within marriage is not to happen unless a specific time is agreed upon.
- 4. "Except it be with consent for a time" – mutually agreed time
- 5. "That ye may give yourselves to fasting and prayer"
 - a) Fasting is not mentioned very often in the New Testament but that does not mean it wasn't to be done. Quite the contrary – when it is mentioned it is written as an assumption that fasting is done as a normal course of the Christian life.
 - b) "Fasting and prayer" – this is not a normal time of prayer that is meant here but the verb tense (aorist) "express this temporary purpose, and shews that the prayer meant is not ordinary but extraordinary, - seasons of urgent supplication" (Alford).
- 6. "And come together again" – a euphemism for the intimate relationship (sex) within marriage.
- 7. "That Satan tempt you not for your incontinency" – goes back to verse two and points to the phrase, "to avoid fornication." Satan is there to tempt us any way he can, and if a wife withhold intimacy, or if a husband withhold intimacy, for any length of time, it has the

possibility (and, most likely, the probability) of allowing the devil to tempt them to seek that intimacy elsewhere, and in so doing the marriage is often destroyed, the family is destroyed, the church is affected, and the cause of Christ is brought into reproach.

8. Verse six is showing that the "consent for a time" is not mandatory but is allowed if it means that the person is doing so to draw closer to the Lord, or to derive something from the Lord that is needed.
 - a) The word "this" is pointing back to the text before, both in its entirety (from vs. 3) and specifically to verse five. "The 'this' applies to his advice in general, but especially to the last verse" (Pulpit Commentary).
 - b) "Permission" – an allowance – as both an apostolic writer as well as the one who planted the church in Corinth, he was writing to them in that capacity, allowing them the freedom to abstain from intimacy for a time if needed. There is nothing more in this verse than that.
 - c) "Not of commandment" – he is not issuing this as a command of Scripture, or a command from the Holy Spirit – it is to be understood as something they have the freedom to do.
 - d) The broader application (and one which some theologians put forth) can be seen as Paul permitting the freedom to marry or stay single, depending on the needs and direction of the individual. There is not command of Scripture to say one has to marry any more than there is to say they

have to remain celibate and single.

III. BASIC PRINCIPLES OUTSIDE MARRIAGE – VS. 7-9 (OR, THE SINGLE LIFE)

A. This goes to the first verse, and the answer to the question that seems to have been asked in the letter sent to Paul from Corinth – “Is single life wrong?” (or some variation on that point).

B. It’s a personal decision (gift) – vs. 7

1. “For I would that all men were even as I myself” – this is a clear indication that Paul was not married at the time of this writing and that he considered being single in the service of the Lord would be the most fruitful (something he develops further later in the chapter).

a) “For” (γάρ) – a causative particle expressing the reason for what has been before, affirmed or implied (Zodhiates).

(1) He is saying that even though being married was not wrong, and if married there were certain basic principles to follow, in his opinion, in his ministry, remaining unmarried was the better choice for him.

(2) The word for “for” in the Greek is not found in the Critical Text. There it is the word most often translated “but” (δέ) – it is an adversative denoting transition or conversion, and serving to introduce something else, whether opposed to what precedes or simply continuative or explanatory (which would be its use in

this verse). Many of the better, modern verses, don't translate the word at all, and simply state, "I wish that all were as I myself" (ESV), or something similar.

- b) "I would" – I wish, it is my desire
 - c) "That all men" – this is not gender specific – it is a word simply meaning humanity as opposed to animal – it is either (or both) male or female.
 - d) "Were even as I myself" – unmarried at the time
2. "But every man hath his proper gift of God, one after this manner, and another after that"
- a) The "proper gift" is something unique to them – something that one is not to force upon another. It is a personal conviction, we would say today, and not one that would be a command of Scripture.
 - b) "Gift" – charisma – a gift of grace, the result of grace. The ability to stay celibate, either having never been married or having become a widow or widower, is something given to a person by the Lord and is no more right or wrong than being married. In fact, to be single and used of the Lord is, in cases as Paul shows later, a better thing than being married, especially in times of great persecution and trouble (as he was in often).

2 Corinthians 11:23–27

²³ Are they ministers of Christ? (I speak as a fool) I am more; in labours more abundant, in stripes above measure, in

prisons more frequent, in deaths oft.

²⁴ Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one.

²⁵ Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep;

²⁶ In journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren;

²⁷ In weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness.

- c) "One after this manner, and another after that" – Whatever our God-given direction is in life, both in marriage (or not marrying), as well as every other choice we make based on the gifts and abilities we have been given, are to be used for the advancement of the cause of Christ.

C. It's for a practical good – vs. 8 (to be seen later in chapter seven)

1. "I say therefore" – because of what is said in verse 7 about the gift to stay single and celibate
2. "To the unmarried and widows" – the unmarried of both genders (not just unmarried males as some teach it, although it could, and probably does, include them) and the widows (he deals particularly with females who had not been married later in the chapter). There's

nothing unique here – he is simply addressing those that were in the position he was in, and who were given the ability to stay that way.

3. “It is good” – from a word that means beautiful – “good, excellent in its nature and characteristics, and therefore well adapted to its ends” (Outline of Biblical Usage, Larry Pierce).
4. “For them if they abide even as I” – single and celibate

D. It's not everyone's persuasion – vs. 9

1. Being celibate is not for everyone, and if one cannot remain celibate then they should marry for it is better to marry than to fall into the sin of fornication outside of marriage.
2. “But if they [the unmarried] cannot contain” – control their sexual desires. “In a figure drawn from athletes, who in preparing themselves for the games abstained from unwholesome food, wine, and sexual indulgence” (Outline of Biblical Usage).
3. “Let them marry: for it is better to marry than to burn”
 - a) “Burn” – the Greek word (πυρόω) is where we get the word “pyro” from (as in pyromaniac).
 - b) Henry Alford interprets it thus: “better to marry than to be inflamed with lust.” This,

again, points to one major function within marriage is that of the intimate relationship (sexual intercourse).

Conclusion: Whether married or not, any intimate relationship (even that of sensual touching) is to be done only within the confines of marriage. If so, Satan has lost that major issue in which to tempt us and distract (and often disable) us from service to our Lord.

If we just simply follow His word, in all that it says, we will be able to do much more for Him. The reason the church, and the cause of Christ in general, is so ineffective today is because those that are truly born again by the Spirit of God have become so used to sin.