

Sermon preached by Pastor Ben Kuerth on 1 Corinthians 7:1-16 on August 28th, 2016 at Victory of the Lamb.

Series: 1 Corinthians – A 21st Century Church
Today's Focus: Intimacy and Purity in Marriage

“What's Love Got to Do with It?”

Any of you recognize what this is? It's a set of blueprints for our ministry center here. I can still see in my mind's eye our friends from the Builders For Christ last summer pouring over the blueprints sometimes early in the morning or late in the evening—consulting them, studying them, talking about them, making plans based on them. And that's why they did such a fantastic job of building this ministry center that we're in today. Because when you're building something that you want to last, that you can feel good about...if you want a building that's up to code and will pass inspection, it's essential to take the time to study and follow the blueprint, right?

In a similar way that's what we're going to do today as we continue our journey through this section of 1st Corinthians that has to do with intimacy and sexual purity. Today we're going to consult God's blueprint for marriage just like the Corinthians did when they were confused because of the culture they lived in and they asked the apostle Paul some practical questions.

And the good news about this is...unlike our ministry center blueprints which had to undergo multiple revisions (which sometimes proved to be confusing to the builders because of that!), God's blueprint for marriage hasn't actually changed. God is the architect of marriage. He designed it as a blessing for us from the beginning. He safeguarded it for us with some specific directions to follow to protect us. And this was the case in that perfect place of the Garden of Eden before there was ever even a hint of sin.

Because here's something profound to consider. Marriage is not just a social convenience open to evolve and change with the times. Rather marriage is actually a picture of God's unchanging, committed love for you through Jesus Christ till the end of time. So marriage, rightly understood according to God's blueprint, teaches us about what love really is meant to be—a living portrayal of God's selfless love in action and the intimate bond God wants to have with us forever.

Did you know the Bible starts off with a wedding and ends with a wedding? What we see in Genesis is that right after God the Creator made our first parents, Adam and Eve, he brought them together in marriage. Adam met Eve, the helper God made for him, and he said, “At last!” as his heart went pitter-patter. Then God himself officiated at the first wedding and sanctioned it with his blessing. Adam and Eve then came together and experienced truly fulfilling intimacy as one flesh and so at first everything was absolutely perfect. That was the first wedding.

And then at the end of the Bible, in the very last book, Revelation, there is another wedding that takes place. This wedding takes place after everything else has happened after that first wedding, after sin marred Adam and Eve's perfect relationship with God and with each other, after selfishness and strife and shame messed everything up for all of us, after Satan took God's good gift of sex and made it more sought after than God himself so often, after selfishness and sexual abuse have left a trail of tears and so

many broken homes and broken hearts. Yet after all this, because God's consistent love has not changed with the times, there is yet a wedding *in heaven*—the marriage of Christ and the Church. It's a wedding where, even if you never experienced love here on earth in marriage the way you hoped, Jesus Christ and his Church finally dwell together forever in heaven where loneliness and shame are gone for good, where everyone who believes in Jesus is made completely whole and new, and everything sad comes untrue!

This is how much God loves us that his Son would be so committed to us that he would do everything to make it possible for us to be with him in heaven. This is what Jesus did when he came and sacrificially died in utter disgrace for us all on the cross to take upon himself all our shame and guilt. This is what he has made possible since he rose from the dead and now sends out his Holy Spirit to call us to daily repentance and to woo us over again and again with his forgiveness and grace through the gospel. So this is what we want to keep in mind as we consult God's blueprint for marriage today. What's love got to do with it? Absolutely everything when we consider what God's love is and what God's love does.

Now one last thing before we walk through our text from 1 Corinthians 7 today and look at some specific things related to the situation in Corinth... right up front, let's be realistic. This whole topic of intimacy and purity is a huge topic that encompasses so many aspects of life so I can't treat it all in one sermon. And in just bringing up this topic in church I also want to be transparent about the fact that I understand this might be a really tough, even a painful topic for you, and it might bring up a whole host of questions related to specific situations in your life.

So here's what I'm thinking. I have a list of resources I've put together from people both a lot smarter and more experienced than me. Some books. Some websites. Even an in depth study of Christian doctrine related to these issues for those of you who are interested. And I've got those listed on a sheet of paper that you can pick up on the little stand as you leave the sanctuary today if you're interested. I'll also list them and link them on my blog this week. And please, if you have any questions, feel free to reach out to me or Pastor Bill during the week. If there are deeper issues we're not equipped to deal with we'll help you try and find a professional Christian counselor who can help. Sound like a plan? So let's dig into the text today as we ask this question, "What's love got to do with it?"

Now for the matters you wrote about: "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman." [That's what some church members in Corinth were saying. And of course Paul himself was a single guy. Counter culturally he tried to live a celibate life as a single person. In great contrast to the culture of Corinth where everything was about sex, Paul gave legitimacy to living a single, celibate life to the glory of God. Pastor Bill will be talking more about this next week as he finishes up this chapter and talks about how single lives matter in God's eyes too.] ² **But since sexual immorality is occurring, each man should have sexual relations with his own wife, and each woman with her own husband.** [Hugs and kisses aren't to be put out there in the open just casually or for anybody like was common in Corinth. Likewise sex wasn't designed by God to be experienced in a hook-up culture or to be experienced for a trial period before marriage.]

³ **The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband.** ⁴ **The wife does not have authority over her own body but yields it to her husband. In the same way, the**

husband does not have authority over his own body but yields it to his wife. [In other words a husband and wife belong to each other! They are equals, mutually yielding to one another for each other's ultimate good.] ⁵ **Do not deprive each other except perhaps by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.** ⁶ **I say this as a concession, not as a command.** ⁷ **I wish that all of you were as I am. But each of you has your own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that.**

⁸ **Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I do.** ⁹ **But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion.**

So I think you understand the main point, don't you? God designed marriage as the only appropriate relationship for the expression of healthy sexuality. But let's stop here for a moment and ask the question, "What's love got to do with this?" Because here's what I've noticed sometimes happens. When two people want to get married and you ask them the question, "Why do you want to get married?", what do you think they say? "Because we're in love." Or "Because we love each other." So then I ask a follow up question, "What do you mean?" And he'll say, "She makes me so happy and she doesn't expect me to change anything about who I am and she's so hot." And she'll say, "He makes me so happy and treats me like a princess. He makes me feel special. He's sexy."

Now, friends, is this bad? No, not necessarily. After all, the feelings of romance and the flame of passion are certainly a part of marital love. And this isn't a bad thing. This is a good thing according to God's good design. But think, if a person has the attitude, "I love you because you make me feel happy" what happens when they no longer make you feel happy? If a person's really saying, "I love you because I expect you to meet my needs" is that really what love is all about? The devil's so sneaky! If you love someone only in so far as they make you feel happy or you expect them to meet your needs then you know what? You're not in love with them so much as you're in love with yourself! At the root of every problem related to intimacy is this sin—selfishness. Selfishness is the very opposite of love. This is why we need to continually go back and consult God's blueprint. Because selfishness says, "You are here for my benefit. You are here to make me happy. You are here to please me. You are here to meet my needs."

Now the Bible here brings up the topic of needs. The needs of a husband and a wife. Why? Because they're real. God created romantic love, he created passion, he created sex to be a blessing. A blessing that bonds two people together in the most intimate of all human relationships. A blessing that expresses and deepens the intimate connection between a husband and wife not only physically, but emotionally, and spiritually at the deepest levels. It's special. It's important. That's why Paul talks about doing one's "marital duty." But what's love got to do with that?

Well, everything if we remember what God's love is. Remember God's love isn't self-centered and selfish. It's selfless and serving. God's love doesn't say, "You are here for me to meet my needs." It says, "I am here for you to meet your needs." God's love is not a transaction where we say, "You do your part

and I'll do mine." Rather God's love says, "I'm here to do everything for you with pure motives and no strings attached."

Applying this not just to matters of intimacy but to every aspect of your relationships and you have the foundation for a healthy marriage. When Paul is talking about a husband and wife doing their marital duty for each other he's not talking about using sex as leverage to sort of get what you want or to make harsh or unrealistic demands. If you're in a relationship where sex is being used as leverage to get something from you, or you're using it like a tool to get what you want...you will never experience true intimacy the way God intended.

¹⁰To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. ¹¹But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife.

¹²To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord): If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. ¹³And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. ¹⁴For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.

¹⁵But if the unbeliever leaves, let it be so. The brother or the sister is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace. ¹⁶How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?

What's going on in this section is Paul is addressing a specific situation that was perhaps becoming all too common in Corinth and so they wanted some help figuring it out. I mean remember the context. Most of the people in Corinth didn't start out as Christians. They used to be pagans who worshipped at the temple of Aphrodite and treated sex very casually. But then what would happen is people learned that Christians were practicing sexual purity, elevating the estate of marriage in way they'd never heard of before. God's Word was then being shared. God's Word was then being taught. And the Holy Spirit was bringing people to faith through it. And sometimes this meant in a marriage all of a sudden one of the spouses would become a Christian but the other wouldn't. So what would this mean? The Corinthians wanted to know what advice the inspired apostle Paul had for them. After all this wasn't a situation that Jesus specifically talked about or addressed with his disciples. And so Paul reaffirms the principle: marriage according to God's blueprint is meant for life. It's a permanent unconditional covenant, not a temporary contract with terms and conditions. Marriage furnishes an opportunity to put unconditional love and forgiveness into practice. And so in this kind of situation with marriage between a Christian and unbeliever, there was a special opportunity for the Christian to put into practice the kind of selfless, committed love that over time can win a person's heart for Christ!

So there is a gospel born optimism here that there is nothing more powerful than the message of Christ's love and forgiveness backed up by a life of selfless Christ-like love. Of course sometimes it

doesn't work out the way we hope. Perhaps for some of you, marriage hasn't worked out the way you had hoped. And this hurts. We're reminded here that one of the painful results of sin in this world is that sometimes a marriage ends whether through adultery like Jesus talked about in our gospel lesson or through what we might call desertion here that Paul is talking about.

And so as much as 1 Corinthians 7 reminds us that God's blueprint for marriage is a beautiful one meant to bring us blessings, yet this side of heaven marriage is not always easy, it's never perfect, and sometimes it ends up not working out the way we hoped. What's love got to do with this? ¹⁵ **But if the unbeliever leaves, let it be so. The brother or the sister is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace.** Can a person live in peace who has experienced the pain of loneliness, or the pain of abuse, or the pain of adultery, or the pain of divorce? Yes. When we acknowledge to each other that no human being can ever meet our deepest needs. No marriage can ever perfectly satisfy our desire to be completely known yet completely loved. Only a perfectly loving God can do that and fulfill our deepest need. The good news is that's just the kind of God we have. His love demonstrated by Jesus Christ on the cross for you and me is all-in, totally committed, and never ending. He knows us and he loves us. It's the kind of love we can build our future on because it will never let us down. Amen.