

7 Now for the matters you wrote about: “It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.”² But since sexual immorality is occurring, each man should have sexual relations with his own wife, and each woman with her own husband.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.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. (1 Corinthians 7:1-7)

Becoming a Christian and following Jesus is a cross-cultural experience. When you start attending church or reading your Bible you might think, “This seems so foreign and foolish.” Or you may even say, “This feels just plain wrong.”

It reminds me of one of my cross-cultural experiences back in college. A friend and I took a position to live and work in the Dominican Republic. Before we left, I took some cross-cultural training with missionaries and church leaders. I remember them telling me, “When you go to another country, you are going to find out that things are different. Not only might they dress differently or eat differently, they are going to think differently and have different values, beliefs, and behaviors than you. And when that happens

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- 3. listen without judgment.**

and you might just learn something.”

And that’s exactly what happened. It didn’t take long for me to realize that things were different in a different country. But they weren’t just different superficially, the people I interacted with had a whole different set of beliefs about life and they put different values on things like family and time and personal space. So I tried to be patient, keep an open mind, listen without judgment so that I could learn something.

That is what I’m asking you today. We are continuing our sermon series **Foolproof**, which is a sermon series through Paul’s letter to the Corinthians. And in this section Paul is going to address the issue of marriage and sex. And so much of what he says is going to sound counter-

cultural for many reasons. But be patient, keep an open mind, and listen without judgment and you might just learn something.

After addressing what he hears is going on in the congregation now 1 Corinthians 7 starts a new section of his letter. He says, **Now for the matters you wrote about...** In other words, the congregation must have written Paul a letter with a list of questions. They were trying to live in like Christians in their pagan world, but they just didn't know how to do it. The challenge for us who are reading this is that we don't have that letter. We are only listening to one side of the conversation. So we have the challenge of guessing what Paul is addressing.

Trying to interpret this section of 1 Corinthians is like trying to understand a phone conversation when you are only listening to one side of the conversation. You know what one person is saying, but you don't know what the other person is saying. So you have to do your best to put things together.

It seems like Paul had to teach a lot about sexual immorality. It was just accepted in the Corinthian culture. And it seems like the people were wondering, "Does this mean I have to be single and celibate like Paul? Paul responds, ***"It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman."*** In other words, it is ok to be like me. It is good to be single. It is not a bad thing. You are not going to die. In fact, at the end of this section Paul says, **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.** I wish more of you were not so obsessed with sex. I wish more of you had the gift of singleness and could live like I do. But he knows that is not likely so he goes on to say: **² But since sexual immorality is occurring, each man should have sexual relations with his own wife, and each woman with her own husband.** Paul later acknowledges that he wishes more people could remain single and celibate like him. But that is not likely, especially in this hypersexualized culture. And so Paul says that they should get married and recognize that marriage is the God-given design for sex and children.

We need to understand how counter-cultural this verse would have been in first century Corinth. Without getting too graphic, wives had very low status and had to compete for attention from their husbands. It was perfectly acceptable in 1st century Corinthian culture for a husband to sleep with their household slaves, prostitutes, and any other female or male. So Paul is saying that because this is happening everywhere, you need to remember that the proper Christian practice is to have sexual relations with only your spouse and that's it.

They would have been saying, "Whoa, Paul! Does this mean I can't have anyone on the side? I have needs. I have urges. This is just what we do in our culture."

And we have our own hang ups. Paul is saying to us today, "Get married. Don't live together. Get married and then be intimate exclusively with your spouse. Not anyone else. Not looking at pornography."

And we might respond, “Whoa, Paul. That’s not how we do things in our culture. First we start dating. Then we live together to see if we are sexually compatible. Then maybe if we have enough money saved up then we get married.”

I know this sounds offensive but remember being a Christian is a cross-cultural experience. Following Jesus means that our lives will look different than those around us. So if you are offended remember how to respond in a cross cultural experience:

- 1. Be patient.**
- 2. Keep an open mind.**
- 3. listen without judgment.**

So why does he say this? Why get married? And why only be intimate exclusively with your spouse?

Then he says, 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.** 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.**

I hesitate to even read these verses because I know how some people have twisted them. So let me say right away if any of you leave here and you say to your spouse, “See the Bible says that you have to fulfill your martial duty to me. You owe me.” If you say that, then you are misusing Scripture to try and control your spouse and you are sinning and you need to repent. That is not what Paul is saying.

Here is what Paul is saying:

Sex is not a weapon of control but a gift to give.

What Paul is explaining is that the act of intimacy is a way of confirming your promises to each other. You are giving yourself to your spouse. You are not demanding anything from them. You are not trying to control them. You are giving yourself to them. This is a picture of what the whole marriage is about.

Pastor Timothy Keller in his book *The Meaning of Marriage* says:

Indeed, sex is perhaps the most powerful God created way to help you give your entire self to another human being. Sex is God’s appointed way for two people to reciprocally say to one another, “I belong completely, permanently, and exclusively to you.” You must not use sex to say anything less.

This is so countercultural. In our culture sex is about gratifying our own cravings. It is about what we get out of it. But that is not how it was designed. It is a gift that you are to give exclusively to your spouse. Every other sexual act is selfish. Is taking. It is saying, "I want something from you, but I'm not willing to give you my full commitment."

Nobody else in culture is teaching this. So hearing this sermon might feel like a cross-cultural experience. This might feel foreign. Some of you maybe have never heard this before. It might feel foolish, like this is just so old-fashioned and out of date. And some of you might think this is completely wrong. And you are angry. Remember be patient. Keep an open mind. Listen without judgement and you might learn something.

God is not teaching us these things to make our lives worse. He is not trying to rain on our parade. He is not trying to take away our fun. He wants to turn us in to better people. And when we have sex outside of marriage it is no longer a gift that we give as a sign of our life-long commitment. But it is an act of selfishness.

Now if you really see that, now you might be feeling guilty. You might realize that you have lived outside of the commands of God. If that is you, I want you to remember Jesus. Jesus often went directly to the people who have sinned sexually to tell them that they were forgiven. Jesus died for all those sins. And not only did he die for your sins, he has cleansed you and made you pure. You are washed in the waters of your baptismal grace.

Now he is calling you to live a life of purity and commitment. If you are single, live like Paul. Use your singleness to be a blessing to many others. If you are married, let your life be a gift to your spouse. This is going to be countercultural. It is going to look foreign, foolish, and even wrong even to those of us who have grown up in the church. So why go against culture? Why be different than the rest of the world? Paul explains the answer when he wrote to the Philippians:

¹⁸ For, as I have often told you before and now tell you again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. ¹⁹ Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things. ²⁰ But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹ who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.

The majority of the culture is going to live to gratify their desires. But we live to glorify God. Their minds are set on earthly things. But, Paul says, our citizenship is in heaven. The reason the Biblical view on marriage and sex seems so foreign is because it is. It comes from the kingdom of God. And we who follow Jesus are citizens of that kingdom.

So why do we keep living such countercultural lives? Because Paul says, one day, even is going to come down. We are waiting for Jesus to return and transform our lowly bodies to be like Christ's glorious body. We are looking for heaven to come to earth. So right now we live as citizens of heaven according to God's values and God's kingdom.

When I came back from living in the Dominican Republic I was different. Other people had noticed it too. I thought differently about time and people. The culture had rubbed off on me. Something that I thought was so foreign and foolish became part of who I was. And I think the same can happen to us when it comes to Christianity. The more we immerse ourselves in the Bible and the more we gather in communities as believers and the more we follow Jesus, the more we will live according to the values of God's kingdom. Something that we thought was so strange at one time, will become our core value. So live as citizens of heaven. Live according to the values of Jesus and his Word. And when he returns he will make all things new, including you. Amen.