

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: The Church - a Work in Progress

(Studies in 1 Corinthians)

"The Intimate Marriage"

(1 Corinthians 7:1-7)

Study #9

Introduction: What's on your mind...?

Our minds are filled with all sorts of things: weather (and tragic floods) along with politics and war and sports...and sex.

That sex is on our minds is not remarkable. Sex has been on people's minds since the very beginning.¹ And it is on our minds by God's design.

There is a lot of thinking about sex that is wrong. It's damaging, and unhealthy. God wants us to think *rightly* about sex.

It would be wrong to only think of sex clinically, or to think of it crassly, of as a means of exploitation, or to think of it fearfully.

There are better ways to think about sexual matters, and today we listen as the Apostle Paul guides us into some of God's truth about some aspects of sex within marriage. The Bible will be our guide as we explore some of what it takes to develop an intimate, sexually honest marriage.

Note: For those who are not married, I would assure you that Paul's words are still very important. Among the reasons for that is that gifts we are given and powers we have are to be used to bless and to serve

¹ In ancient Judaism, it was a tradition that a newly married man was excused from the obligation to repeat the Shema (Dt. 6), for the reason that his mind would be otherwise occupied, and he would not be able to give proper attention to his prayer.

others. Sexually, that principle applies to husbands and wives. But more broadly, learning to use our gifts and our powers to bless others, applies to us all.

Last Sunday we spent time in 1 Corinthians considering what Paul had to say about sexual practices that don't align with God's creative order as it is described in the first two chapters of Genesis.

The Corinthian Christians were tempted to become sexually involved with people to whom they weren't married. That temptation can be strong now, too. Paul said that Christians shouldn't do that and for all kinds of good reasons.²

This morning, Paul turns a corner. In one way, the corner he turns is by way of addressing legitimate sexual expression in marriage.

But in another way, he turns a corner in that he stops addressing issues he is concerned about and starts addressing questions the Corinthians had raised.

The Corinthians Had Questions (v. 1a)

[1a] Now concerning the things about which you wrote...

From this point forward, Paul responds to the questions the Christians in Corinth had asked him in a previous letter.

We don't now have access to that letter. But they must have asked a lot of questions in that letter, because Paul addressed lots of issues from here to the end of this long letter.³

This morning, we listen as he begins to address sexuality because they had evidently asked about this.

² Among them, because (1). our bodies are forever and what we do with our bodies matters for the life to come (1 Cor.6:14); (2). our bodies belong to Jesus and what we do with our bodies matters to Him (1 Cor. 6:13); (3). Having been redeemed by Jesus, we glorify God by the passionate pursuit of purity (1 Cor. 6:20).

³ We can reconstruct some of it, based on the issues he addressed in the remainder of the letter: food sacrificed to idols / stronger and weaker Christians / legalism / Pharisaism (chs. 8-10), worship issues, (chs. 11-14) questions about life after death, (ch. 15) and collecting an offering / generosity. (chapter 16).

About Sexual Interaction Outside Of Marriage (v. 1b)

[1] Now concerning the things about which you wrote, it is good for a man not to touch a woman.⁴

That phrase ***“not to touch a woman”*** is a *euphemism*.

We use euphemisms to say more delicately what could be difficult for our listeners to hear. We use euphemisms that are intended to soften the blow in reference to death.

Paul used the term ***“to touch”*** is a euphemism for having sexual relations.⁵

He means to say that it is an OK thing for a man - or for a woman - to lead a life free from sexual activity.

In the passage we saw last Sunday (6:12-20), Paul made it clear that it was not just OK, it was critical that men and women NOT be sexually involved with people to whom they weren't married.

So, this first verse applies if we are thinking about relationships outside of marriage. There is no setting in which sexual relations outside of marriage are either a right or are right.

But the Corinthians had not asked if it was a good thing to engage in sexual immorality. They knew the answer to that. They had asked if not engaging in intimacy was a good thing.

Paul says, ***“Yes.”***⁶ Then, he went on to clear his throat and explain that he was giving a qualified ***“Yes.”***

It is a good thing to not touch a woman sexually (or for a woman to not touch a man sexually) outside of marriage.

⁴ This may not be the way your Bible reads. The New International Version renders the Greek, ***“It is good for a man not to marry.”*** Other versions may render the original Greek in slightly different ways.

⁵ See Genesis 20:6 where God protected Abimelech after Abraham lied to him about Sarah being his wife, ***“Then God said to him in the dream, ‘Yes, I know that in the integrity of your heart you have done this, and I also kept you from sinning against Me; therefore I did not let you touch her.’”***

⁶ Are Paul's words lifted directly from the Corinthians' letter to him? Perhaps...

But Paul says that different rules apply for husband and wife.

About Sexual Interaction Within Marriage (vv. 2-6)

Marriage and God's Design for Sexual Intimacy (v. 2)

[2] But because of sexual immoralities,⁷ each man is to have his own wife, and each woman is to have her own husband.⁸

The sex drive that God has placed within us is strong and there is a danger that we might sin, sexually. And, since sexual immorality does unique, personal damage, men and women should feel free to marry and should engage in full sexual expression with each other in their marriages.

I'm suspicious that some of the Corinthians were thinking, ***“God wants me to avoid marriage if possible. And if I get married, I'll try to avoid sexual involvement with my spouse.”***

Paul says, ***“No. Wrong thinking. A single life is wonderful, but not for everyone. And - where health and opportunity allow - a married life is to be a life of sexual involvement with your spouse.”***

Now some will hear this and may be offended. They'll think, ***“That sounds kind of crass. I should get married to avoid immorality. Or I should allow someone to marry me so that THEY can avoid immorality?”***

I get the offense. But what Paul gives us here is not intended to be a *sufficient* reason to get married and it also not the *only* reason Paul gives for marriage.⁹

He simply says that in addition to being intellectual, emotional, physical, and spiritual beings, we are sexual beings.

⁷ The words, ***“because of immoralities”*** mean, ***“in order to prevent immoralities....”***

⁸ As has been pointed out by many, in addition to commending marriage, this verse also forbids polygamy, which was common in ancient times.

⁹ Paul proves to have a high view of marriage in what he wrote in Ephesians 5.

And, if it is not the *only* or the *primary* reason why marriage is a good idea, sex is *a reason*. Marriage serves lots of other wonderful purposes beyond being a hedge against sexual sin - but it does serve that purpose.

In a society as full of temptations as first-century Corinth was OR as twenty-first century San Antonio is, Paul advised marriage, not as the lesser of two evils, but as a God-given safeguard against evil.

And, so far from marriage being wrong, as some Corinthians were thinking, it is for very, very many people and for very many reasons exactly the right thing to do to get married.

There is a hint of a sexual overtone in this verse by Paul's use of the word, "**have**." The word implies "*to have a wife / a husband sexually.*"¹⁰

But what is hinted at here is explicit in what follows.

Marriage and Sexual Involvement (vv. 3-6)

Sexual involvement in marriage is part of marriage (v. 3)

[3] The husband must fulfill his duty to his wife, and likewise also the wife to her husband.

Let's take a couple of minutes to note what Paul is saying.

First, notice the mutuality that both the husband and the wife are to bring to marriage.

What is expected of one partner is expected from the other. In sexual matters, husband and wife are on equal footing and what is in view is a reciprocity of giving and serving each other.

When marriage partners don't enjoy reciprocity in marital intimacy, the whole sexual aspect of marriage can become destructive and negative.

¹⁰ The word is certainly used that way in Matthew 14:4, "**For John had been saying to him (Herod), 'It is not lawful for you to have her.'**"

Sex may be used to take, to demand, to coerce, or to shame. But in God's order of things, sex offers the opportunity for a husband or a wife to give to their spouse in a startlingly unique and human way.

Second, notice that the reference to sexual involvement here has no necessary connection to procreation. There is no support here to say that *the* purpose of sexual relations in marriage is to preserve the race.

Paul portrays sex here as it is in many places in Scripture, as a good thing to be enjoyed in marriage.¹¹

And third, notice Paul's use of the word "**duty**."

He means to say that the husband and the wife owe each other. Literally, the phrase reads, "**Let the husband pay back what is owed to the wife**" and vice versa.¹²

And here's the thought. "*Because you have agreed to marry me, and I benefit from all the privileges marriage affords, I owe you sexually.*"

When a man and a woman marry, they begin a one-flesh relationship. That one-fleshness extends to sharing everything - thoughts, prayers, material possessions, a future - and their bodies.

In marriage, sex is not to be used as a bribe, or as a reward for good behavior, or as something to be withheld as a threat.

Husbands and wives are to freely give themselves to the other out of gratitude to God ("*what God has joined together*") for the privilege of being married to that woman, to that man.

Having said that, there will certainly be times and seasons in a marriage when sexual intimacy will be infrequent or absent, and for all kinds of reasons. (Paul mentions one "*for instance*" in what follows.)

¹¹ See The Song of Solomon, Proverbs 5. Unnecessary asceticism and monasticism, along with the forbidding of marriage and the enjoyment of marital union has plagued Jesus' church at many times.

¹² See Matthew 18:32 and Romans 13:7 for two verses which use the same word as used in 1 Cor. 7:3 with the sense of paying a debt owed.

But, here, and again, except for exceptional situations and for certain seasons - Paul says that marriage involves the free giving of all that a man and a woman are to each other - spirit, soul, and body.

Paul further develops this idea in what follows.

Sexual involvement in marriage gives authority to serve (v. 4)

[4] The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; and likewise the husband also does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does.

Paul is clearly writing about sexual matters here. But what he says transcends sexual matters.

A husband and a wife belong to each other. And, speaking personally, there are legitimate ways in which my wife can have expectations of me - my time and my energy and my resources - that no other person can legitimately have of me. And vice versa.

As Kathy's husband, I can legitimately have expectations of her that I don't have of anybody else and that nobody else can have of her.

One day, some years ago, when we still had kids at home, I called before I left church to go home. That was not unusual.

I often called to see how things were going, if I needed to buy three gallons of milk on the way home, to see if it was safe to come home. On this particular day, it almost wasn't.

It seems that Kathy had been driving home from running some errands shortly before I called. She had been followed - by a police car.

That car - with lights flashing - followed her all the way to our driveway.

There in front of our house, in broad daylight for all the neighbors to see, and as they wondered what crime that Smith woman had committed, the policeman stepped out of his squad car and walked up to a very bewildered Kathy.

He pointed out that the inspection sticker on her car had expired - three months earlier.

Now getting the car inspected had always been my responsibility. I blew it and Kathy explained that to me.

She expected me to take care of her car. Nobody else in the world expects me to make sure their car is running right or is inspected. But Kathy did. And that is OK. I am her husband.

It is OK for her to expect involvement from me in her life that it would be unreasonable for her to expect from any other man.

And it is right for Kathy to expect intimate relating from me and I from her. We're married.

Addressing sexual intimacy in marriage inevitably leads to a discussion of marriage health, generally, because a couple's intimate life is a piece of the whole of their relationship.

So, when I say that a husband's time and energy belong to his wife and that a wife's energies and resources belong to her husband, I've opened a can of worms.

We're each forced to ask if we really believe that. Are we living that out?

Does my wife know beyond the shadow of a doubt that she is the object of my affection, that there is no other, that I have given my heart to her, and that I have as my aim to bless her?

Does your wife know that about you? Does your husband know that about you?

What would your spouse say if you asked them this afternoon: *"Does it seem to you that I am devoted to you? Not that I am living responsibly with you - doing the laundry, washing the car, cooking meals, mowing the yard, balancing the books. Does it seem to you that I am FOR YOU?"*

What would you do if your spouse took a while to answer. Or if you heard anything but an enthusiastic, “Yes!”?

Would you hear that hesitation or that “No” as an invitation to do the hard work to convince your spouse that you are all in for them?

Would you be willing to...

...talk things out?

...court your wife to let her know that you love her?

...do the special things for your husband that you know he values?

...take time to walk, talk, pray together, cheer them on in a project or encourage them in a challenge they’re facing?

If you couldn’t work things out, would you be willing to take it to the next level and talk with a trusted friend or two? Would you be willing to make an appointment with a counselor?

There is exposure there, for sure. But what if taking either of those steps could help you grow and could improve your marriage?

God’s plan for marriage involves full, personal investment. Married people relate to and belong to each other in unique ways that they don’t relate to or belong to anyone else.

And neither husbands nor wives have the right to use their own bodies completely as they wish.

This mindset that Paul urges (mutual sexual giving and serving) was not winning the day in Corinth.

From what Paul says here, we learn that married partners were depriving each other of sexual intimacy. Paul said that had to stop.

Sexual involvement in marriage is a mutually-given gift (vv. 5-6)

[5] Stop depriving¹³ one another, except by agreement for a time so that you may devote yourselves to prayer, and come together again to that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.

¹³ The King James version has “*defraud*” a perfectly legitimate translation. Similarly, Phillips’ version has “*cheat*.”

Here, Paul suggests a scenario in which abstinence from sexual activity is legitimate within marriage. The exceptional case he mentions is a season of a focus on prayer.

He imagines a time when, in the rush of everyday life it may be necessary to take exceptional measures to secure a quiet time with God. It certainly can be the case that the pressures of life and of normal marital relations might get in the way of a husband’s or a wife’s focus on Jesus.

If that is the case - and if both husband and wife agree to it - then they might choose to refrain from sex for that season.

But we note what Paul says at the end. ***[6] But this I say by way of concession, not of command.***

Even when a couple is committing themselves to a season of special focus on prayer, they don’t HAVE TO abstain from sexual relations. Paul simply says to consider it.¹⁴

Now, might there be other exceptional cases in which sex might be put on the shelf for a season, or when sex isn’t possible?¹⁵ Sure.

There are all kinds of health issues that might arise, or exceptionally full schedules, or even stations of life.

But, generally speaking, intimacy, affection, and sexual involvement are important parts of marriage.

Paul urges a married mindset where both partners say to the other, “*My aim is to bless you with my whole self - spirit, soul, and body.*”

I think you’ll find that Paul rounds out this passage in a very interesting way.

¹⁴ Verse 6 has been variously understood. I think that this is what he means: “*I will make this concession: If husband and wife both agree not to be intimate for a short time, in order to give themselves without distraction to prayer (or to some other holy or wholesome pursuit), fine. But if you do agree to do this, it must be for a limited time, and with a view to returning to each other.*”

¹⁵ Temporary abstinence for a spiritual purpose is advised in the Old Testament Eccles 3:5; Joel 2:16; Zech 12:12-14.

All Are to Experience Contentment (7:7a)

[7a] Yet I wish that all men were even as I myself am....

When we first meet Paul in the New Testament, all evidence points to him being a single man. We get confirmation that he was single here in 1 Corinthians. (9:5)

We don't know if he was never married, was a widower, or that perhaps his unbelieving wife left him. Whatever the case, he was single, and he expressed his wish that everyone would be as he was.

Not that everyone would be single, but that everyone would be content in that state in which they found themselves - single or married - as he was content.

Paul was a big fan of marriage, but he was a spectator, not a participant. He did see certain advantages to the single life, as we'll see next Sunday. But he didn't advocate for everyone remaining single.

His perspective was broader than that and his final comment today may be exactly what each of us need to hear.

All Have Their Own Unique Gifting from God (7:7b)

[7b]...However, each has his own gift from God, one in this way, and another in that.

Paul directly speaks here to a special gifting (we might call it "wiring") that God has given to some people for single life and some for married life. Either is a gift from God.

It is worth saying here that some might wish to be married and are not. In their case, singleness is a gift they can learn to lean into - and we'll look into this next Sunday.

If a marriage is especially difficult, the husband or wife can learn to view that as a gift that will mature them and grow their faith.

Both the single life and the married life require special grace and have certain advantages. But Paul's words may have an application that speaks, as well, to our topic for today, which is marriage.

I'm going to suggest that the chances are good (nearing 100%) that in any marriage, sexual "giftings" are not identical between husband and wife, at least from time to time.

That difference is one of the many things that make marriage such a rich laboratory for personal growth in love and in trust in God.

But what if a husband and a wife were to take Paul's words here and apply them to their marriage?

What would happen if a husband gave himself to understanding his wife's sexual gifting and learned to love her according to that knowledge. (see 1 Peter 3:7).

What would happen if a wife gave herself to understanding her husband's sexual gifting and respected him for that? (Ephesians 5:33)

Wouldn't there be great relational breakthroughs in marriages, if, in this matter and in so many others (finances, household chores, child-rearing, work / life balance), husbands and wives accepted that their spouse is "gifted" by God differently than they are and learned to love them - just as they are.

Conclusion:

Throughout our time together this morning, I have wanted to tread lightly. Sexual issues are emotionally charged.

Most everyone has strong feelings about these issues. Most marriages struggle from time to time in the sexual arena, as, frankly, most marriages do, from time to time, in other arenas.

Yet, as I mentioned at the beginning, sex was God's idea from the beginning. He is the One who thought it all up, and He says that sexual intimacy in marriage is a good thing.

And so, we have a section 1 Corinthians given entirely to the theme of sexual intimacy in marriage.

Sexual involvement in marriage is important enough for us all, married and unmarried, to dwell on for a Sunday morning.

And the reason for that is that at the heart of this issue is the use of the gift of sex and the power of sexual desire in marriage.

That drives us to think about the use of all kinds of power in all of our relationships and to beware of the dangers of manipulation and guilt-tripping and rejection. What are we to do with the powers that we have?

The scene is the last Passover meal He had with His disciples. He knew ***"that the Father had handed all things over to Him."*** (John 13:3) He knew that He had been given all power. And knowing that, what did Jesus do?

He got up from the meal and washed His disciple's dirty feet. He used His power as ***"Teacher and Lord"*** as an opportunity to serve.

In the final analysis, we are to use any powers we have - the power of wise counsel or physical strength or listening or our sexuality - in service to those God has called us to love.

To address that question, we'll end today by turning, as we often do, to Jesus where we'll see His use of power on His last night on earth.