



AN IMPERFECT LOCAL CHURCH
A Study in 1 Corinthians
TEACHER – Lesson 11

GENERAL OUTLINE

1 Corinthians 7:1-11:16, Questions asked about marriage, idols and head coverings

OUTLINE: Lesson 11

1 Corinthians 7:1-16, Questions about sex and marriage

7:1-7 Sexual abstinence in a Christian couple

7:8-9 Preliminary statement to unmarried Christians

7:10-17 Remain married

7:10-11 Christian couples

7:12-16 Mixed faith couples

The problems of sexual immorality in the Corinthian church present an odd and contrasting mixture of cases. The church tolerated a case of incest but wouldn't eat with sexually immoral non-Christians. Some were going to prostitutes, while others were apparently advocating sexual abstinence even for married folks. (Those going to prostitutes may have been married to someone practicing abstinence.) While some were promoting sexual abstinence within marriage, others (or maybe the same) were considering divorce. Paul deals with both issues.

Students should pay particular attention to the specific audience for each paragraph as indicated in the outline.

DISCUSSION

1 Corinthians 7:1-7, Sexual abstinence in a Christian couple

Two of the most difficult and important questions in this passage relate to the first verse, for the answers exert great influence on our understanding of what follows. Those questions are: 1) What does it mean to "touch a woman"? and, 2) Who said that is it not good to do so? As background to our study consider these points. The word for "touch" usually means exactly that – to touch. Many times in the Gospels, Jesus "touched" people, usually to heal them. In nonbiblical Greek writings, "to touch" was often a euphemism for sexual relations. Nowhere in known writings of the time did it mean "to marry." The most literal translation of the phrase is "to touch a woman," as shown in the NKJV. The ESV has, "have sexual relations with," and the NIV says, "to marry." Anything other than "to touch" is an interpretation which may be correct or not. So our first challenge is to decipher verse 1 and accurately identify Paul's main theme.

- 1. What is the general attitude of God towards marriage as revealed in the Bible? Although Paul had a personal preference for remaining single, what does the Bible say in support of marriage, and where does it support the general principle that it is not good for a man to marry?**

Starting with God's declaration that, "It is not good that man should be alone," the Bible presents a positive view of the marriage relationship. In Ephesians 5:22ff, Paul says that God even modeled marriage on the relationship between Christ and the church. Paul preferred to remain single, and explains why others might make the same choice, but that is not the same as declaring marriage "not good." Scripture never presents a general principle against marriage.

Where a marriage already exists, the consistent teaching of Scripture is that the marriage covenant should not be broken by man, but is broken by God through the death of a spouse. We can debate what exceptions there might be to the permanence of marriage, but God, by far, prefers that marriages are for life.

- 2. In light of general Bible teachings about marriage, is it more likely that, "It is not good for a man to touch a woman" is Paul's inspired response to something the Corinthians had written, or is this phrase the Corinthian statement to which Paul responds in the following verses?**

Either this statement (the second half of verse 1) reflects the Corinthian question to which Paul is responding, or we don't know what the question was. Verses 2-5 make the most sense if they are offered as Paul's correction of this erroneous idea promoted by some Corinthian Christians. The background to this paragraph seems to be that some Corinthian Christians were saying that sexual relations – even in marriage – should be avoided. (If the main proponents of the idea were Christian women, that could explain why some of the men were going to prostitutes, as in 6:15-20.) If abstinence is Paul's inspired position, then he spends the next several verses contradicting himself, which is unlikely.

- 3. If it is permissible to remain single (like Paul), why does he say that "each" man and woman should have his or her own spouse? Consider the possibility that verse 2 does not mean that because of immorality everyone should get married? If it doesn't mean that, then what does it mean?**

This is why our understanding of verse 1 is so important. If Paul said (v. 1) that it is good not to marry, then marriage is for the weak-willed, and marriage becomes a lesser spiritual status than remaining single.

But if verse 1 is the Corinthian claim that sexual relations are not good, then the context is different. In verse 2, Paul contradicts that idea by telling married men and women that they

should have sexual relations with their own spouse (rather than someone else, e.g., prostitutes). Because of the temptation to immorality, especially if sexual desires are not met by one's spouse (6:15-18), married couples should be sexually active within their marriages. Each one should have an intimate relationship with "his/her own spouse." This is not a backup plan, but God's design for marriage.

4. What does Paul say about sexual abstinence for a married couple? Since Paul devotes verses 2-5 to this topic, does that tell us anything about the meaning and source of the statement in verse 1 about not touching a woman?

Sexual abstinence in marriage is not good and should not be the standard practice. Whether to marry or not is not mentioned before verse 8, which is to a different audience. Since verses 3-5 are focused on sex in marriage, and not on the merits of marriage itself, this clarifies our thoughts on verses 1 & 2, suggesting again that verse one is a Corinthian thought that sex is not good in any situation. Paul disagrees. And verse 2 promotes normal sexual relations between husband and wife to reduce temptations that lead to sexual immorality.

5. What is the "concession" of verse 6? Is the concession found in the preceding verses or the following? Does the Bible generally treat marriage and the sexual relationship between husband and wife as a concession that should be avoided if possible? Different translations lead to different understandings.

This, too, ties back to our understandings of verses 1 & 2.

If the concession is "to get married" if you can't live without it, it is the first time in Scripture that marriage is presented as a concession rather than part of God's original design and plan.

The concession is the practice of occasional abstinence by mutual agreement between spouses for a limited time that is devoted to prayer. But normally, abstinence in a marriage is not recommended.

The reading of the ESV promotes the idea that the concession is to be found in verse 7, where Paul presents his desire that others would follow his example of remaining single. This is a new idea (i.e., pros and cons of marriage) to the passage and doesn't make much sense. Nowhere in the preceding verses does he even bring up the subject of remaining single. He has discussed life within marriage, not alternatives to marriage.

6. Paul is very clear that celibacy should be practiced by a specific group of people. Who are they?

Two criteria are given: 1) Unmarried people, who, 2) have the gift of abstaining from sexual activity. If they don't have the gift, then the recommendation is marriage and not sex outside of marriage.

7. Considering modern-day concerns about abusive spouses, should we take verse 4 in an absolute sense, or does the immediate context limit the application of spouses having authority over each other's body? What is that "immediate context"?

The context is, should Christian couples abstain from sexual relations with each other. The idea called ascetism, which can include sexual abstinence, has sometimes been thought to demonstrate or lead to a superior spirituality. Some Corinthian Christians may have been adopting ascetic principles. Paul disagrees. In that context, "having authority" over a spouse is a restating of the idea of verse 3, is reinforced in verse 5, and does not endorse any form of abuse.

Note also that whatever authority the husband has over his wife, she has the same authority over him. This is not about who is strong enough to dominate the other, but the importance of a mutually satisfying and healthy intimacy between wife and husband as intended by God from the beginning.

Paul doesn't get into the question of how often a married couple should have sex, but he asserts that neither spouse should make a habit of "depriving" the other.

8. In conclusion to this section (vv. 1-7), what is the basic problem or question that Paul addresses? What is the topic that he talks about the most? This gives us the context of the passage.

Paul is discussing the subject of sexual abstinence, particularly in a marriage. He is not focused primarily on marriage itself, but on one aspect of marriage. Most likely, some Corinthians were promoting sexual abstinence in marriage, and Paul says that such is not healthy, and should be limited to rare occasions, and is never mandatory.

1 Corinthians 7:8-9, The unmarried and widowed

Paul makes a brief statement about life and options as a single Christian.

9. Fundamentally in verses 1-9, Paul offers two acceptable responses to a Christian's normal sexual desires. What are those two options?

1. Get married and enjoy a normal married sex life.
2. Remain single if you have the gift of abstinence.

1 Corinthians 7:10-17, Remain married

7:10-11 Christian couples

7:12-17 Mixed faith couples

Once again determining the context and the exact questions behind Paul's answers is not easy, and this makes understanding certain details of Paul's answers extremely difficult. It is possible, and even likely, that he is now treating what some readers promoted as a Plan B to be used if abstinence in marriage (Plan A) was not accepted. Another avenue to promote sexual abstinence would be to be unmarried, even if that meant ending current marriages. Paul responds by affirming that God wants marriages to be permanent.

Even when we understand the questions to which Paul is responding, this passage contains some extremely difficult statements. Many of our difficulties arise because we want Paul to answer our questions instead of the questions that were troubling the Corinthians.

10. If verses 1-5 answered the question, "Should married couples abstain from sex?" what question do verses 10-16 answer?

Answer: Should married couples stay married? We might lack total clarity as to why this question was asked, but that it is the main question is very clear. Everything Paul writes in these verses calls for Christians to remain married if at all within their power.

11. Verses 8-9 are addressed to "the unmarried and widows," and verses 10-11 "to the married." So who are "the rest" introduced in verse 12?

The following verses make it clear that he spoke to Christians married to Christians in vv. 10-11, and now beginning in verse 12 his audience is made of Christians married to non-Christians.

12. Why might Christians have thought it preferable to divorce from their non-believing spouses? This assumes that the marriage predated the conversion of the believing spouse. What is Paul's response and what is his reasoning?

Paul had already referred to a misunderstanding by which some Christians thought they should break off all contact with immoral people (which could include a spouse, 5:9-10). And he had mentioned the unholy union that sex with a prostitute would cause (6:16-17). It would have been easy enough for a Christian spouse to suspect that intimacy with a nonbelieving (pagan) spouse "defiled" the marriage and the family as a whole. The imagined remedy would have been to end the marriage by divorce.

13. What benefits are brought to a marriage and a family if even one spouse is a faithful Christian?

Rather than being defiled or made "unclean" by the non-Christian spouse, holiness is brought to the marriage by the believer. The non-Christian is drawn closer to God, as are the children. Eventually, they might even be brought to Christ. "Sanctified" (v. 14) certainly doesn't mean that the nonbeliever is automatically saved by the marriage. Verse 16 clearly states that salvation is potentially still down the road. Having one Christian in a couple was better than not having any Christian in the marriage.

14. What does Paul say to do if the spouse commits adultery?

Nothing. As much as we might want Paul to have dealt specifically with this question, he says nothing about it in this passage.

15. What does Paul say explicitly about remarriage after divorce? Does verse 15 address this issue?

The answer is the same as # 14: Nothing. As much as we might want Paul to have dealt specifically with this question, he says nothing about it.

One of the most hotly debated verses in this passage is verse 15. We want to know if "not under bondage" (ESV, "not enslaved," NIV, "not bound") means "free to marry." Strong arguments are made for and against this interpretation. At best, if this is meant to permit remarriage, it is not as clear as we would like.

More likely, "not under bondage" means that the Christian should accept the spouse's decision, and not engage in a prolonged fight to prevent the divorce. But even this interpretation is contested by many.

The clear teaching is that God prefers lasting marriages. That is best. Divorce (or separation) is sometimes acceptable, but never preferred. It is significant that even for the Corinthians the main question wasn't, "When can we remarry?" They asked, "If we are married, can or should we abstain from sex?" and "Can or should we divorce?" Remarriage would be 3rd on the list, at best.

16. Verses 17, 20 & 24 will be included in the next lesson, but they summarize Paul's basic message in verses 1-16, and that is, "Stay as you are." In verses 1-16, Paul states only two exceptions to that principle. What are they?

1. If single or widowed, marriage is permitted though not required.
2. If a non-Christian spouse departs, accept it.