



CHARIS-MATTERS

STUDIES IN FIRST CORINTHIANS

Text

First Corinthians 7:1-9

Topic

Paul answers those in the church at Corinth who were professing that abstinence from all sexual activity, even by those who were married, was spiritual

Title

“The Abstinence-minded Professors”

Introduction

Do you think that the lack of sexual satisfaction in a marriage should constitute biblical grounds for a divorce?

Martin Luther did! The great Reformer wrote this (and I quote):

One may find a woman so stubborn and thickheaded that it means nothing to her though her husband fall into unchasteness ten times. Then it is time for the man to say: If you are not willing, another woman is; if the wife is not willing, bring on the maid. But this only after the husband has told his wife once or twice, warned her, and let it be known to other people that her stubborn refusal may be publicly known and rebuked before the congregation. If she still does not want to comply, then dismiss her; let an Esther be given to you and allow Vashti to go, as did King Ahaseurus (Esther 2:17).¹

¹ Ewald M. Plaas, *What Luther Says*, (St. Louis, Concordia, 1991) paragraph 2811

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To be fair I must add that Luther did a great deal to bring sex out of the medieval closet and promote it as a normal and healthy part of a Christian marriage. But his stand on sexual satisfaction was extreme - even to the point that he suggested if you can't satisfy your spouse sexually it is your responsibility to find someone else who can.

How would you defend an argument like that from the Bible? You might use the section of Scripture we're studying today, First Corinthians 7:1-9. In fact it has been used to argue that the spouse who has a sexual urge has the right to demand it be satisfied whenever he or she so desires. Anything else would be sin.

The Puritans in early America were serious about sexual satisfaction. If a Puritan man did not frequently or adequately perform his husbandly duties, the consequences could be severe. One such man, James Matlock, was accused before the church of denying "conjugal fellowship" to his wife. **He was excommunicated from the church.**²

I hope I can show you something a little more gracious, and a little more biblical, from this text.

I'll organize my thoughts around two questions: #1 Are You Married? Enjoy Your Intimacy, and #2 Are You Widowed? Explore Your Celibacy.

#1 Are You Married?
Enjoy Your Intimacy
(v1-6)

The church at Corinth had written to Paul asking him a series of questions. He begins to address those questions in verse one.

1 Corinthians 7:1 Now concerning the things of which you wrote to me: It is good for a man not to touch a woman.

I should tell you that the phrase "to touch a woman" was a well-known Greek expression for sexual intimacy.

² Richard Godbeer, *Sexual Revolution in Early America*
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We need to make a decision about the phrase, “it is good for a man not to touch a woman.” Did Paul write those words as a summary of what he believed? Or was this the teaching being professed by some in the church at Corinth?

For lots of reasons, I have concluded, along with many other commentators, that this was the teaching being professed some in the church at Corinth. They had decided it was more spiritual to abstain from sexual relations altogether.

It’s not uncommon for folks to assume that, for some reason, a life of celibacy is more spiritual. Many religions still teach this. (We’ll see in verses seven through nine that abstinence is not more spiritual and never has been).

The problem in Corinth, and the problem being addressed by Paul in these verses, was that this teaching was being applied to believers who were already married. The result was that one or the other spouse had decided to quit having sex.

It’s going to be important to understand that Paul was addressing married believers who had decided to withhold sexual intimacy from their spouses. It helps you avoid extreme ideas about what Paul was saying.

1 Corinthians 7:2 Nevertheless, because of sexual immorality, let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband.

One paraphrase of this verse reads,

Certainly - but only within a certain context. It’s good for a man to have a wife, and for a woman to have a husband. Sexual drives are strong, but marriage is strong enough to contain them and provide for a balanced and fulfilling sexual life in a world of sexual disorder (The Message).

“It is good for a man not to touch a woman (and vice-versa) if you are unmarried. If you are married it is absolutely wrong to think of abstinence as more spiritual. It is normal and therefore spiritual to enjoy sexual intimacy in your marriage. Thus their slogan is not for the married among them.

1 Corinthians 7:3 Let the husband render to his wife the affection due her, and likewise also the wife to her husband.

Within the marriage, sexual intimacy is all good! Go ahead and enjoy it, rendering the “affection due” one another. It is “due” in the sense that it was expected by your spouse as part of a healthy, normal marriage. To suddenly and unilaterally decide it is more spiritual to quit rendering affection is wrong.

1 Corinthians 7:4 The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. And likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does.

“Honey, your body belongs to me. I’m having a sexual urge. You have no say in the matter. If you don’t satisfy me then I’m going to tell the church and they will discipline you publicly. If that doesn’t work I’m going to dismiss you and find someone who can satisfy my every urge.”

Does that sound right to you? *Of course not!*

This verse has been abused to create all kinds of mischief in marriage. What might it really be saying?

In the context we’ve established, it might really be talking to the spouse who has bought in to the teaching that they are more spiritual by withholding sex. Paul was telling them they do not have the right over their own body to make that decision. They don’t have the “authority” over their own body to withhold sex as a lifestyle. By virtue of the fact they are married they have a responsibility to reach mutual decisions about sexual intimacy.

1 Corinthians 7:5 Do not deprive one another except with consent for a time, that you may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again so that Satan does not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.

Any decision to withhold sex, to quit being intimate, must be mutual. This is a fasting from sex for a set period of time that both spouses must agree to in order to avoid dangerous consequences.

1 Corinthians 7:6 But I say this as a concession, not as a commandment.

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Paul wasn't recommending you fast from sex. He was conceding that some might want to and thus he was regulating the practice.

Paul was a good pastor. He understood that some of them were spun-out by this teaching that you should quit having sex, quit being intimate. He told them "No," that's not right, but he made a concession so that there could be a sort of compromise in the marriage as the couple got back on track.

It's important we read these verse right. It's been said that the average man thinks about sex every seven seconds. That's not true, but the truth is almost as bad! According to an intense Kinsey Institute study, the average man thinks about sex approximately every two minutes and he ponders the thought for about a minute. If these verses are teaching that a husband, for example, has the right to demand sex whenever he feels the need to be satisfied... **Well, you do the math!**

Here is the bottom line on these verses. Sexual intimacy is to be enjoyed in marriage. There is nothing spiritual about abstaining from sex. Whatever your desires might be you should want to meet the desires of your spouse. It is a matter for mutual discussion and decision, not demands.

Enjoy sexual intimacy in marriage. It's spiritual to do so.

#2 Are You Widowed? Explore Your Celibacy (v7-9)

"Celibacy" means *to abstain from sexual relations*. The decision to abstain is often promoted as being the highest spiritual discipline. I grew up in the Roman Catholic tradition that demanded its most spiritual leaders become and remain celibate.

The apostle Paul is often misunderstood on this point. He did not teach that celibacy was more spiritual. Let's see what he said.

1 Corinthians 7:7 For I wish that all men were even as I myself. But each one has his own gift from God, one in this manner and another in that.

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The marital background of the apostle Paul is sketchy. Some say he must have been married at some point but that his wife either died or left him after he became a believer. All we know is that he was not married and he was celibate.

He “wish[ed] that all men were even” as he was. Why? A couple reasons he’ll suggest later are these:

1. If you are married you are less free to do certain ministries for the Lord because you are commanded to care for your family.
2. If you are married you are more affected by persecution when it comes.

The most important thing to notice in verse seven is the statement, “but each one has his own gift from God.” Celibacy is a gift. Since it is a gift, it cannot be a choice. God either gifts you with celibacy or He does not. It is not, therefore, more spiritual to remain celibate. In fact, it can be far less spiritual as you struggle to remain celibate in the energy of the flesh when all the while God hasn’t gifted you.

Somewhere in the annals of church history sexual intimacy started being seen as some sort of concession to the flesh, as part of the fall of man, as unspiritual. The church started teaching sexual intimacy was a necessary evil for procreation but that abstinence and especially voluntary celibacy was super-spiritual.

It is a sad misunderstanding of what the Bible teaches.

Apparently another part of the teaching that was going around in Corinth was that if you were unmarried you should stay unmarried, that it was always most spiritual to abstain from getting married. Paul addressed that in these next two verses.

1 Corinthians 7:8 But I say to the unmarried and to the widows: It is good for them if they remain even as I am;

The term, “unmarried,” refers to widowers. Paul was addressing widowers and widows. Borrowing from the language of the Corinthians he told them

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“it is good for them” not to touch a woman or a man. It is “good” to be celibate.

But there is a “but”:

1 Corinthians 7:9 but if they cannot exercise self-control, let them marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion.

Here is a more literal translation of verse nine:

1 Corinthians 7:9 (ALT) But if they are not exercising self-control, let them marry, for it is better to marry than to continue being inflamed [with lust].

Paul was addressing widowers and widows who were not exercising self-control. In other words, they were committing sexual sin - having sexual relations outside of marriage.

The teaching that “it is good for a man not to touch a woman” wasn’t working for them. They did not have the gift of celibacy which would have resulted in “self-control.” They should get married because marriage is God’s design for those He has not gifted to remain celibate.

Paul was very practical. If you find yourself widowed, explore celibacy. Maybe God will give you celibacy as a gift. You’ll be free to minister for the Lord with fewer cares and commitments.

If He doesn’t give you the gift of celibacy, it is not spiritual to try in the energy of your flesh to remain celibate. Get remarried and enjoy sexual intimacy within the beautiful boundaries of a mutually satisfying marriage.

Conclusion

The biblical teaching is gracious. Explore celibacy. If you find you have not been gifted by God, then get married and, within your marriage, enjoy sexual intimacy by mutual concern and consent.

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