

Iglesia de Carne

Studies in First Corinthians

Text

First Corinthians 7:1-9

Topic

Some of the believers in Corinth were professing abstinence from sex even though they were married

Title

“The Abstinence-Minded Professors”

One may find a woman so stubborn and thickheaded that it means nothing to her though her husband fall into [sexual immorality] 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.¹

Who made that outrageous outburst - appealing to the petulant behavior of a pagan Old Testament king as his biblical justification??

Let's just say, if you are a wife, be wary if your husband suddenly wants to take you to a Lutheran church. Yep, the great reformer himself, Martin Luther, was serious about his sexual satisfaction.

(No disrespect intended to Lutherans; as far as I know, this is not what they currently teach).

The Puritans were serious about sexual satisfaction. If a Puritan man did not frequently or adequately perform what they called his “husbandly duties,” the

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

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.**

Think of it. If we were Puritans, instead of a weekly Prophecy Update, we'd have a Frequency Update. (Well, we'd have **one**, and then no one would ever come back).

These are decisions couples ought to make on their own. You need *principles*, not *policies* - especially not policies set by others in the church or by the surrounding culture.

Where do believers derive these outrageous ideas? Mostly from the first nine verses of First Corinthians chapter seven. Our text in First Corinthians does touch on these (and other) matters, but in a way that encourages you to think spiritually rather than issue ultimatums.

I'll organize my comments around two points: **#1 If You're Married, It's Spiritual To Enjoy Intimacy**, and **#2 If You're Single, It's Spiritual To Enjoy Celibacy**.

#1 - If You're Married, It's Spiritual To Enjoy Intimacy (v1-6)

Take a peek at the end of verse one, where it says, "It is good for a man not to touch a woman." Who said that?

Not Paul; it was a saying that was being circulated in the church at Corinth. Paul wrote to correct it.

Where did the believers - at least some of them - get such an idea? Let me suggest where it might have originated.

First, thus far in First Corinthians, we've had two references to angels:

- Paul spoke of he and other apostles being "a spectacle... both to angels and to men" (4:9).
- He said that in the future "we shall judge angels" (6:3).

Going forward, there will be another mention of angels. In 11:10 we read, "the woman ought to have *a symbol of authority on her head*, because of the angels." We'll talk about what it means when we get there. For now we just

want to consider that the behavior of angels was of particular interest to the believers in Corinth.

Second, you will recall that the believers were divided into groups. Some were of Paul; others were of Apollos; others were of Peter. There was another group who claimed to be “of Jesus.”

Because there was an “of Peter” group, scholars think it likely that the big fisher of men had visited the church in Corinth. It is not a stretch to think he shared the marriage teachings of Jesus with the believers.

What if the “of Peter” and the “of Jesus” groups knew of Jesus’ teaching that, “At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven” (Matthew 22:30)? After another of Jesus’ teachings on marriage, the disciples said, “If such is the case of the man with *his* wife, it is better not to marry” (Matthew 19:10).

Coupled with the fact that Jesus was celibate, it would go a long way toward explaining why some of them were advocating abstinence in marriage. Why not be like Jesus and the angels right now? Why wait for eternity? If there is no marriage or giving in marriage in Heaven, wouldn’t it be more spiritual to live that way now?

Keep this in mind. It will help us to not misunderstand Paul if we remember the context of his remarks.

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

Chapter seven begins a new section in which Paul answers comments that they made, or questions that the Corinthians asked him, in a letter he received from them. He will comment on the following subjects: marriage, food offered to idols, spiritual gifts, the resurrection of the dead, and the missionary offering for the Jews.

“To touch a woman” was a polite Greek idiom for sexual intimacy. It has become popular to use crude language in Bible teaching. It’s trendy. One popular preacher earned the nickname the “Cussing Pastor.” All of our speech ought to be seasoned with grace. The culture we are trying to connect with expects better of us. Paul was straightforward, even blunt at times, but not crude.

It may have been mostly wives that were gravitating towards celibacy. In the previous chapter, the Corinthians were defending visiting prostitutes. How much more would they be apt to consider prostitutes if their wives were withholding sex.

1Co 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, “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.

“His own wife... her own husband.” A biblical marriage is one biological man, and one biological woman - heterosexuals - in a monogamous covenant of companionship that is to last until the death of one spouse. I should add that if you are in Christ, you are to marry a believer. There are biblical grounds for divorce and subsequent remarriage in the Lord. Sexual immorality is one.

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

Paul again chose modest words. “Affection” means, or can mean according to *Strong's Concordance, conjugal duty*. It is “due” in the sense that it is expected by your spouse as part of a healthy, normal marriage. To unilaterally decide it is more spiritual to quit rendering such physical affection is not spiritual.

1Co 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 during the weekly Frequency Update and they will discipline you publicly. If that doesn't work I'm going to dismiss you and find someone like Queen Esther who can satisfy me.”

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

I made-up that exaggeration to make a point. A lot of people want to make just that kind of application of this text.

Listen to this. It's from a commentary on *The Song of Solomon* by a well-known Bible teacher: "It is NEVER right to withhold sex from your marital partner. You not only hurt your partner but you also hurt yourself. If one partner needs it, the other is to respond willingly and enthusiastically."

Sadly, he had to step down from ministry because he got a little too enthusiastic with a woman who wasn't his wife.

Is that what Paul meant? Here is a quote from a much different perspective:

Does the fact that we shouldn't withhold ourselves from our spouse mean they have the right to demand sex from us? The answer is "no." In marriage, Christ calls husbands to love their wives like He loved the church. Jesus' love for His bride was utterly selfless in that He gave himself up for her. This call to love unselfishly extends to our sexual relationship within marriage. We should, as Paul exhorted, have the mind of Christ, "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others." Selfish sex within marriage can be just as sinful as sex outside of the marriage covenant, since it is a way of laying our spouse down for us, instead of laying ourselves down for our spouse.

Which approach sounds like Jesus?

Remember: Paul was addressing spouses who made a unilateral decision to no longer be intimate.

He was simply saying that they do not have the authority over their own bodies to make that decision.

Here is another way of looking at it. If a spouse has authority over his or her spouse, then they can tell them what **not** to do as well.

Let's play this out in a scenario. For the sake of realism, the husband will be the demander. He comes home from work, and says, "Babe, I'm having an urge to have sex right now. I'm exercising my authority over your body to satisfy me."

The wife answers, “I’m in the middle of cooking dinner. So I think that I will exercise *my* authority over *your* body and tell you, ‘No.’ ”

The husband responds, “Wife, Jesus said you are to submit to my authority as head of the household.”

To which the wife answers, “And Jesus is your Head, telling you to love me the way He loved the church and put aside His authority to minister to her.”
Checkmate.

This verse has been abused to create all kinds of mischief in marriage. Paul was talking to the spouse who has adopted the teaching that they are more spiritual by withholding sex. Paul was telling them they do not have the authority in marriage over their own body to make that decision.

Warren Wiersbe wrote, “Keep in mind that Paul is replying to definite questions. He is not spelling out a complete “theology of marriage” in one chapter. It is necessary to consider as well what the rest of the Bible has to say about this important subject.”

Paul wasn’t addressing the question of how frequently a married couple ought to be intimate. He wasn’t teaching that all sexual urges must immediately be fulfilled. He wasn’t suggesting there is no such thing as self-control. He was saying that married couples are responsible to reach mutual - not unilateral - decisions about their intimacy.

1Co 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.

He anticipated that some of the believers, whether they were affected by this abstinence teaching or not, might want to abstain from sex as a fast before the Lord. In that case both spouses must “consent” to the terms of such a fast in order to avoid sexual temptation. The emphasis is again on “consent,” on their mutual decision making.

Let’s talk about “self-control.” There are seasons in marriage when intimacy isn’t possible. Can you say “deployment?” If you are military, you’re going to be separated from your spouse for months at a time. Self-control is the answer - and it is made possible by the indwelling Holy Spirit.

But didn't Paul indicate that we lack self-control? He said that those who fast from sex in marriage might stumble their spouse by challenging their self-control.

In other words, by trying to be spiritual, they might be tempting their spouse to sin.

Abstinence, or declaring a fast from intimacy, cannot be your decision acting alone. Your sexual appetite is unlike your other appetites in that it involves your spouse.

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

There is no "commandment" to abstain from intimacy. There would be if it was something that could make you more spiritual.

Here is the bottom line on these verses. Sexual intimacy is to be enjoyed in a biblical marriage. It is part of God's design for marriage. You can't make a unilateral decision to abstain. There is nothing spiritual about abstaining from sex. Whatever your personal desires might be you should want to meet the desires of your spouse. Sexual intimacy is a matter for mutual discussion and decision, not demands.

#2 - If You're Single, It's Spiritual To Enjoy Celibacy (v7-9)

Was Paul married? There is nothing in the New Testament to indicate that he was married during the span of his ministry.

He almost certainly was married at one time. It would have been a disgrace for him to be single when he was Saul, a Pharisee's Pharisee. The description he gives of himself as to his zeal among the Jews presupposes he had a wife at one time. He would never have climbed the ranks in Judaism as a single man.

What happened to Mrs. Saul? I'm not clear on whether or not a Jewish wife could legally divorce her husband in the first century. In this case, after Saul was converted on the road to Damascus, I'm thinking the Jewish religious authorities would have strongly encouraged Mrs. Saul to abandon her husband.

Or she may have died, leaving Paul a widower. Either way, Paul had real insight into these issues.

1Co 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.

He “wish[ed] that all men were even” as he was, i.e., single. Why? A couple reasons he’ll suggest later in this chapter:

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

Paul was single. As all single believers should, he practiced abstinence. Sexual activity outside of marriage is immoral; it is sin.

But he said something more about his particular case. He said he had a “gift.” It’s the same word that is used for other gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Celibacy is *refraining from marriage and from sexual relations*. Celibacy can be a gift - a supernatural enabling - given by the Holy Spirit as He sees fit.

Something to contemplate: Can celibacy be a temporary gift? One commentator wrote, “There is the temporary state of celibacy which everyone experiences.

Many of you, perhaps, do not feel called whatsoever to the celibate life, but, you are not yet in the married state. This is the state of temporary celibacy.”

“One in this manner and another in that” continues Paul’s theme that celibacy and abstinence in marriage are not more spiritual than marriage with sexual intimacy.

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 sex. Paul addressed that in these next two verses.

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

It is “good” to remain single doesn’t mean it is more spiritual. It just means there is nothing wrong with it; and it can free you up to serve the Lord without other family obligations.

Let me say this. We tend to look suspiciously on Christian singles. Some, at least, are called to remain that way.

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

They were not exercising self-control. This doesn't mean that they had to sin. It wasn't an excuse. Just the opposite. Self-control is possible as you yield a yourself to God. If you find it a struggle, you ought to marry.

The teaching that “it is good for a man not to touch a woman” wasn't working for them. They should get married because marriage is God's design for those He has not gifted to remain permanently celibate.

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 married or remarried and enjoy sexual intimacy within the beautiful boundaries of a mutually satisfying marriage.

Don't sin. Trust that you can yield to the indwelling Holy Spirit for self-control.