

Marriage and Celibacy Choices
1 Corinthians 7:17-35

Turn to 1 Corinthians 7. Why is it better not to marry? When is it better to marry? Why should we not get too worked up about either one? This message is the sixth in the series: marriage, celibacy, and bodies. Our Scripture today tells us how to think about the choice between marriage and celibacy.

If we're married, we don't have a choice about this, and many celibates don't really have a choice either. Today's Scripture is not about either one of those groups. Most of today's Scripture is for unmarried people for whom marriage is a real option. How should they think about that choice? This Scripture also guides those of us who have no choice in these things.

Problem in Corinth – Bad Teaching

Some teachers in the Corinthian church had been telling them that all sexual intimacy was sinful and defiled. These teachers said that even for married couples, living celibate lives was holier and more pleasing to God. In the beginning of 1 Timothy 4, we find out that Timothy in Ephesus faced teaching like that in the church there.

And the problem in Corinth was that one spouse would believe that, and the other would not. That caused tension in marriages, as you can imagine. So that's the first thing Paul clears up. A basic principle of marriage is that both partners stay sexually available to their spouse. Sometimes we don't have a choice, but if we have a choice, we're available to our spouse.

Human commands have always been a big problem for the church. It was a problem for the Jews when Jesus was on earth, and it is a problem in the church. Paul writes letters to eight different churches, if we count the church on Crete where Titus was when he got Paul's letter to him.

For five of these eight churches, human commands were a problem. In those five churches, teachers were saying, "this is bad, that is bad, God does not want that," when in fact God was fine with it. And it happens the other direction too. Teachers can say that God approves certain things that in fact he does not want to see.

Our consciences can be wrong in both directions, they can condemn us when we're innocent, and they can bless us when we're guilty. Following the Lord means we are endlessly educating our own consciences. We sort these things out by wide reading of Scripture, and listening to others who do the same. In Corinth, wrong teaching said that all sexual intimacy was defiled.

We'll begin with vv17-24, which correct the core of the wrong teaching.

Situation / Career Choices Do **Not** Move Us Toward / Away from God – 1 Cor 7:17, 21, 24

What Paul really wants to say is that going from married to celibate, or going from celibate to married, does not affect your relationship to God at all. As far as your status with God is concerned, you are not moving up the ladder or down the ladder. This is a basic principle of following the Lord. We covered this in a sermon not too long ago. Situation equals assignment.

Each person should live as a believer in whatever situation the Lord has assigned to them, just as God has called them.... Each person should remain in the calling they were in when God called them ... Brothers and sisters, each person, as responsible to God, should remain in the calling they were in when God called them (Vv17, 21,24)

I used to think some jobs were holier than others. If I really followed the Lord, I thought, I would have a job like that. No, no, no. One of many ways my conscience has needed education. Where you are is your calling, and you'll never be more called than you are. Our situations change, and sometimes we have to change them. No problem. But it did not bring us closer to God or take us farther from him. How to be faithful where I am? That's the right question.

Advice to the Unmarried – 7:27-28

Are you pledged to a woman? Do not seek to be released. Are you free from such a commitment? Do not look for a wife. But if you do marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned. But those who marry will face many troubles in this life, and I want to spare you this.

But if you do marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned. The Corinthians had been taught that marrying was a sin. No. Being married is just as holy and righteous as being celibate, and being celibate is just as righteous and holy as being married. As far as our standing before God is concerned, there is not a speck of difference.

But those who marry will face many troubles in this life, and I want to spare you this. Paul does think celibates have an advantage in this life, but it is purely pragmatic: it's easier, because there are not so many troubles for people who are not married.

Jesus also thought it was better not to marry, but Jesus did not say why it was better. But Paul did. There has been some debate about whether or not Paul was ever married. There's a line in Jewish tradition that says a Pharisee has to be married, and Paul was a Pharisee. That line was written at least 100 years after Paul, and Pharisaism had changed quite a bit. We just don't know. In any case, he's been single for some time, and finds it an easier way to live.

The Time is Short, This World is Passing – 7:29-31

What I mean, brothers and sisters, is that the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they do not; those who mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they

were not; those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep; those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away.

Imagine that you are 14 or 15 years old, and you live with your parents and maybe some brothers and sisters. One day your parents tell you all, “In a few years, we will move to a different place far away. It will be a very good place, everything you need and want will be there. But we’re not taking anything with us, and we’re never coming back. So don’t get too attached here, and don’t make plans as if you’ll spend your whole lives here, because you won’t. We take nothing with us, and we’re not coming back. It will be the best place ever. Keep that in mind for the next few years until we go.”

Every believer has heard this from Christ, whether or not we took it to heart. We’re moving, we’re leaving, don’t forget that. He’s gone ahead to get our place ready. He said that. We know that. He’ll come back to help us with the move. It’ll be great! Paul’s telling us this so we’ll lighten up a bit on the marriage thing. The form of this world is already passing away. Keep the big picture in mind in everything.

Why is it Better not to Marry? Be Free from Concern! – 7:32-35

I would like you to be free from concern. An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord’s affairs—how he can please the Lord. But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world—how he can please his wife—and his interests are divided. An unmarried woman or virgin is concerned about the Lord’s affairs: Her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit. But a married woman is concerned about the affairs of this world—how she can please her husband. I am saying this for your own good, not to restrict you, but that you may live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord.

Jesus lived in a Jewish society that assumed being married and having children was the godly way to live. Jesus lived without that and said it is better not to marry. Paul and the Corinthians lived in a promiscuous and over-sexed society, just like we do. He also said celibate is better.

Both Jesus and Paul are a little disappointed that none of God’s people are celibates by choice, only by default. They’re celibate because for some reason they have no choice. Neither Jesus nor Paul are satisfied with that. It’s a good choice.

But those who marry will face many troubles in this life, says Paul, and I want to spare you this... I would like you to be free from concern. “Pleasing your spouse takes up a lot of good energy,” says Paul to the unmarried. “Is that what you want?”

People, there are no easy options in this. Marriage is not easy. Young and old alike, couples getting married badly underestimate the difficulties they will face in marriage. Celibacy is not easy either, especially if there are not close friends. Celibates must have close friends. God gives us those two choices, marriage or celibacy.

You can decide those are both too hard, you will set God's ways aside and live a freer sexual life style. But there is a lot of heartache and despair down that road as well.

Song of Songs

I read through the Old Testament most days, enough to turn the page once. Genesis to Malachi, then start again. During the days I was preparing this sermon I happened to be reading the Song of Songs. Song of Songs is a love poem. A young woman and a young man are completely enthralled with each other. They long for each other, they want to be close to each other, they hate being apart.

Song of Songs includes raw desire on the part of both for the other person's body. And they daydream about the other person's body, and it's not the body with the clothes on, it's the body with the clothes off. It is not pornographic writing, but it is certainly erotic writing.

The couple has this intoxicating desire for each other. God loves that. Part of being made in the image and likeness of God is that women and men can experience that. It's in the Bible to honour and celebrate that kind of experience. God made us like that and he wants us to be like that.

So on the one hand, I'm reading the Song of Songs as it celebrates erotic love, and I'm trying to keep my thoughts decent, and on the other hand I'm reading Paul and Jesus, who say that Song of Songs isn't the whole story, and it's better to walk away. I will leave it at that. God's book includes both.

Sexual Desire not a Small Matter

Paul does not minimise sexual desire. At the beginning of this chapter, it was one of the reasons that husbands and wives were not to deprive each other. If you deprive each other, it could lead to sexual immorality. That's Paul's argument. Sexual desire is strong force, and Paul never says just pray and fast and take a cold shower and think about something else. He wishes people could be celibate and content, as he is, but he knows that's not always possible.

In v9 he says to the unmarried, if you can't control yourself, then get married, because it's better to marry than to burn. "Burn" means desire is a steady distraction, you don't function well. It's better to be celibate than married, but it's better to marry than to burn.

In the last part of the chapter he talks to couples that are engaged to be married. He tells them that if it works for both, you could just stay engaged and not marry. But if you find out you're not behaving well with each other, no problem, do what you want, get married. God is not disappointed if you decide to marry after all, you've lost no ground with him.

Remember, people, that this whole chapter is about *choices*, and how to think about our marriage *choices*. Jesus talked about eunuchs in the marriage conversation in Matthew 19, and eunuchs have no choice. Most of the celibates in the church did *not* choose it.

It just happened, one way or another, and they don't have a way to change it. They cannot make marriage happen. It did not occur to them that they had this gift. God just put them in that spot, and that's how it is. That has always been common in the church, including this church.

God helps. God always helps. I know some married people who would far rather be single, and I know some single people who would far rather be married. They are both in hard places, and God helps them as he always has. For Paul, single and content was as good as it gets.

Marriage and Weddings

There is trend among people these days to live together without getting married. What I mean is that people who call themselves believers live together and are sexually active without being married. The world has always done things like that, but we're not the world, we've been called out of the world. In the Bible, the answer to these desires is marriage.

I don't know what a wedding looked like in Corinth, but we do know that Corinth had something called marriage and something that passed for a wedding. Almost every ancient society had some kind of ritual and ceremony that they called a wedding, and God always took that at face value. God cares a lot how we live when we are *not* married, and a lot about how we live when we *are* married, and he lets each culture decide how a wedding will look. He's not fussy about that.

What do you do if you're burning with desire? Get married, of course, says Paul, it's better to marry than to burn. If you're engaged and not behaving honourably with your fiancé, what do you do? Get married, of course.

Now, too often couples just move in together when this happens. They say that in God's eyes they are already married. But they are not. Does Canada have something called marriage? Yes. Well then, that's what God goes by.

Canadians who are not believers know what marriage is. Here's a story I may have told before. I am standing in a long line up to get tickets for some family entertainment. Two women are in the lineup right ahead of me, they know each other, and one complains to the other about her disobedient daughter.

"Children never do what their parents say," she tells her friend. "They do whatever they want. My daughter has a boyfriend, and I told my daughter, 'Don't bother getting married. Just live together. It's better. You don't need to get married.' But what did my daughter do? "She and her boyfriend went and got married! Children never listen to their parents." My brothers and sisters, people who are not Christians know very well what marriage is.

Weddings

Let's make a simple wedding an honourable Christian wedding. By simple, I mean a wedding that could happen in the next few days, next Sunday at the latest. An honourable wedding for believing unmarried couples who are having trouble behaving properly with each other.

Paul says, "flee sexual immorality!" But our elaborate wedding traditions invite the very thing we tell the engaged couple to flee. Our traditional church weddings take at least three months to arrange, and a lot of money. It is a deterrent to virtue.

I know of a believing couple who could not wait the several months to the wedding, and they secretly went to a justice of the peace ahead of time and got married, so that they could be free with each other and honourable before God, even if disappointing to the church. They were not going to tell anyone. They would pretend through the church wedding that that was the real wedding. It would have worked, too, except that by the time of the church wedding she was four months pregnant. Then they produced the wedding certificate that they intended to keep secret.

In my view, the church should be able to put on an honourable wedding as quickly as a justice of the peace. We have no business telling our young people to stay pure if we don't do that. For my part, I will certainly marry you no later than the next Sunday, earlier if it's important.

Summary

--Married people and celibate people are equally holy and pleasing to God. No difference there.

--Sexual desire is a strong appetite. There are no easy choices, marriage and celibacy are both difficult. And many do not have a choice.

--John the Baptist and Jesus and Paul were all celibates. Those three got the kingdom of God rolling on earth. Let's not miss that. Let's not glorify celibacy, but let's not ignore it either. Jesus and Paul both recommended it. *Those who marry will face many troubles in this life, and I want to spare you this... I would like you to be free from concern.* Amen.

PRAYER: Great God, we all need help here. Thank you that you're sympathetic to our weaknesses and temptations. Forgive us where we have sinned in these things. Thank you for showing us your ways, thank you for always educating our conscience, thank you for help and mercy. Thank you that you like how you made us. Help us live worthy of the Lord, and to please him in every way. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May God himself, the God of peace, make you holy through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.

