

1 Corinthians 7:1-16

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[0:00] You take your seats. Turn up again, 1 Corinthians 7, page 955 in the Black Church Bibles. And this is where we are. We took a break for Easter, and we're back now in the book of 1 Corinthians, and we're dealing with the themes that are here because that's the next page in the story. If you're visiting with us this morning, we're simply going through this book section by section.

Well, on the 2-7 this week, I had that experience that lots of you will be familiar with. If you travel on buses, and that is the overheard conversation on the phone, the animated phone call.

And all the way from Acton Vale to West Ealing Broadway, I can tell you, you would be astonished if you knew what she said and what he did and what they're going to do and so on.

Because I could only hear one side of the conversation, that's how it works. There are gaps, aren't there? There are missing details. There's a context that I don't actually have access to. The book of 1 Corinthians is a bit like that. It's a bit like that one side of a phone call.

We can hear what Paul is saying as he is addressing the Corinthians, but we only have his end of the call, and we aren't always completely clear on what is being said at the other side. You see, there has been some correspondence between Paul and the Corinthian church before this.

[1:25] We realize that he began the letter by saying, 1 verse 11, it has been reported to me by Chloe's people. So what he's heard and is writing to the Corinthians about has come to him from Chloe's people. But here we are, chapter 7 verse 1, and he says, but now about the matters about which you wrote. So there's been correspondence and he is now responding. This is his side of the call, his side of the conversation. We're not absolutely clear on how they put across what they said and what exactly was in there. But responding to their questions, the matters about which he wrote, will take up much of the rest of the letter. And although we're not completely sure of the other side of the call, we are clear on the topic, certainly the topics this morning. They are sex, singleness, and marriage. And Paul's response on those three issues, the first bit of 1 Corinthians 7, in fact, will be in these themes actually for a while. Paul seems to be concerned with the way the

Corinthians are approaching these things. In fact, it doesn't seem to be. He is concerned with the way they're approaching them. And underlying their problem, it seems to be their selfishness.

They're being selfish in these areas. Now, before we get stuck in, it's important to say that this is not all that the Bible has to say on these matters. We shouldn't build our theology of marriage or our theology of singleness from this one chapter. One commentator puts it like this. He says, Paul is speaking to, quote, a specific situation at Corinth and is not offering in this chapter a compendium of his views on marriage and sexuality. In fact, if you turn over the page and look down to verse 26 of the chapter, Paul speaks there about a present distress. In some translations, this present crisis. There is something going on in Corinth at the time that is shaping and framing the way he is giving his advice and the answers that he's offering. We'll get to that, Lord willing, in due time. But the first matter that he turns to is something that the Corinthians have said. Verse 1, do you see that? It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman. It's in quotes, that's what the Corinthians have said, and he takes it out and he begins to address it. Now, if you've been with us, and many of you have, you've been with us in these early chapters, initially that sounds like a strange thing for the Corinthians to be saying.

We know that they are a church that have been embracing sexual immorality, for example. They've been visiting prostitutes, and that has been considered okay within the life of the church.

Why would they be holding out celibacy as a virtue now? It is not good for a man to have sexual relations with a woman. Why would they be saying that? Well, the fact is promiscuity and celibacy aren't actually as far apart in terms of what motivates them as we might think. Of course, the behavior is very different, but if you're following your appetites into sex or denying your appetites in celibacy, they can actually be opposite ways of the same desire to take control of your body, to take

control of your life, to have you at the center living on your terms.

[4 : 49] I heard a Trappist monk make this point one time. He said this, he said, you can drink your friends under the table as a way of finding significance or self-worth, or you can enter a monastery, as he had done, where you fast the other monks under the table for the same reason. Very different behaviors, both expressing the same desire, and it's the desire to be in charge of your life. It's the desire to take control and put yourself at the center. You taking control of your body for your sake is exactly what dozens and dozens of online gurus are selling today, and we are buying in our droves. It is a very contemporary thing. Now, of course, there's plenty of good in self-mastery, but not if it comes at the detriment of serving others. Not if it comes really as an expression of you at the center of everything. The self-mastery, the taking control of things, the denying yourself certain things that he's talking about here, that might be a good thing insofar as it enables you to serve others. The problem is, in Corinth, people are making everything all about themselves.

That's the Corinthian problem. So, Paul challenges this in these areas of sex, singleness, and marriage. Here's point number one. Paul says this. He says, sex is good. Serve your spouse. That's verses one to five. Sex is good. Serve your spouse. Because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. Now, chapter six, if you remember, Paul has just told us that sexual sin is a sin against Christ. It's a sin against your own body, and it is a sin against the Holy Spirit. Sexual sin is in a category that is incredibly significant because it desecrates something that belongs to God in profound ways. But the sex bit isn't the problem. It's the sinful use of it that is the problem. Sex is good, Paul is saying. And in the context that God has created, verses two and three, between husband and wife, do you see? It should be, well, verse five, it should be pursued. Do not deprive one another so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.

It is natural that men find women attractive and that women find men attractive and that they want to have sex. That is a natural thing. And God has created marriage as the place in which these desires can be expressed, not just expressed, but pursued and enjoyed. The old Anglican wedding ceremony puts this in the introduction. It says, marriage is for mutual companionship. Marriage is for having children, but also, quote, in order that the natural instincts and affections implanted by God should be hallowed and directed aright. Marriage puts guardrails around the sexual realm so that the desires that we've been created with can be exercised with freedom and with joy. But here's the thing, and here's what Paul is concerned about in this context. When you don't fulfill these desires as God has designed, they don't go away.

And because we are sinful, and because those desires themselves are very powerful, and it's a power that in our day is ramped up significantly by our hyper-sexualized culture, well, we're tempted to follow these desires outside the marriage bed. Amongst the worst animals that exist in the world are urban foxes. Urban foxes, I hate urban foxes, with a kind of unmatched arrogance. They swagger around our neighborhoods, terrorizing us, scattering rubbish everywhere, digging up our gardens. I went to war with the ones that dug up my garden a number of years ago. I went to war with them. It consumed my every waking, and sometimes woke me in the night thought, but they beat me. Every time I blocked a hole in the fence, every time I put wire up in some way, they found another way to get in.

They would make their mess, and they would kind of smugly leave a chicken carcass there just to rub my nose in it. That's just what foxes are designed to do. Actually, they're just doing simply what they were designed to do. Our sexual desires are a bit like urban foxes. If you try and stop them, they will always find another avenue for their expression. And so Paul is saying, in this situation, don't put off marriage. Don't choose indefinite celibacy. Get married, and in your marriage, don't deprive one another. Verse 3, the husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, likewise the wife to her husband. Verse 4, the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise, the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. This is back to Paul's big point. We'll see it. It's a thread that runs all the way through. In fact, you could say it runs through all of his letters. The Christian life is not about you.

[10 : 04] It's about serving others. In this case, serving your spouse. And Paul is saying you're obligated to one another in the bedroom. There is complete mutuality in the bedroom, and neither spouse is allowed to go on strike. There is one qualifier there in verse 5, if you agree together to abstain for a time of prayer, but that's only to be for a short time. Do you see? Otherwise, he says, fulfill your obligations.

But two things to say. Now, you hear this? Because we like rules, we want to know, well, how often does this mean? Give me a number. How often is regular? Well, the answer is as often as your spouse would like. You should probably discuss it. That would be a good thing to do. But when Paul says that you can abstain for a limited time for prayer, that implies that regular sex is the norm. Second thing to say is this. The marriage bed must be governed by the rule of love. Paul will say later, 1 Corinthians 13 verse 5, love does not insist on its own way.

That should guide our approach to all aspects of life, but the marriage bed is included. Notice how the obligations are described in terms of giving, not taking. Giving, not demanding.

If your spouse doesn't fulfill your obligations in the bedroom, that doesn't mean that you can insist on them anyway. Paul describes mutual giving, not taking. Mutual love, not give me what I'm owed. [11 : 41] So we should be willing, the rule of love, but be understanding and patient. I think those two things are important that we acknowledge. So, love, it is not selfishness that must govern these obligations. He says, sex is good. We should serve our spouse, but love must govern these obligations. Before we move on, second point, I do want to say this. I recognize that we could fall short of what Paul says here in all kinds of different ways. Sexual sin, delaying marriage for selfish reasons, leading to more sexual sin, adultery, getting snared in pornography, being stingy in the bedroom.

We could fail in multiple ways. So, it's important to remember that the grace of Christ is offered for every single sin, and He meets us in our failures. The gospel offers hope to sexual sinners. In the Lord Jesus Christ, remember, you are washed, you are sanctified, you are justified. So, where we fall, we should repent, lift our heads, put right what we can, and step forward in the grace that He supplies. That's the first point. Sex is good. Serve your spouse. Point number two, Paul moves on. Singleness is good. Serve the Lord. Singleness is good. Serve the Lord. Verse 7, verse 6, now as a concession, not a command, I say this, I wish that all were as I myself am, but each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another. To the unmarried and the widows, I say that it is good for them to remain single as I am. Now, I take the concession here to relate to the situation in Corinth, that present distress that he talks about in verse 26. This isn't a command from the Old Testament law, nor is it something that was taught by the Lord Jesus. But as a concession to this current persecution or famine or whatever the major social upheaval is, Paul says, I actually wish that all people were single like me. Now, it's interesting to me that we aren't told what the crisis involved, but we are told here that singleness is good. That would have been surprising in the cultural context. And yet, Paul is clear, verse 8, if you're not married or if you're widowed, then don't think that your singleness makes you spiritually deficient in some way.

You're in the same situation as the apostle. But can you see, in referring to himself here, you see the way he says, single as I am. Paul is highlighting how his singleness serves the kind of work that he was doing, single as I am, in order that you could emulate the way that I live.

He couldn't have done the kind of pioneering mission work. He couldn't have gone on his missionary journeys and served a wife or raised children in the way that the Bible expects. Missionary biographies often say very little about their spouses, usually because their spouses were struggling at home without them. In their mission endeavors, they failed their wives and would have been better remaining single. That's his point. Paul is saying singleness is better in those kind of contexts. We'll say more on this in a couple of weeks' time, Lord willing. Paul also says that singleness is good if you've been gifted with celibacy. Verse 7, each has his own gift from God. He's introducing God's gifts into the situation here, one of one kind and one of another. He's just warned in the verses before against choosing celibacy when you haven't been gifted in this way.

[15 : 47] And he acknowledges that not everyone is in the same boat as him, but there are some who are, and that is good, and it should be used accordingly. That singleness, that gift of celibacy should be embraced for all the freedom that it affords in order to serve God. Celibacy, which we could just simply describe as sexual purity, is what all of us are called to outside of marriage, but not all of us have been gifted with it. How do you know if you have the gift? It's pretty simple. You aren't caught up with lust, you're not looking at porn, and you're not troubled by sexual fantasies.

It is a gift that allows you to stay the right side of verse 9. Look at verse 9. It means that you're able to exercise self-control. It means that you're able to live in a way that doesn't burn with passion. So Paul, again, is coming back to this need to avoid sexual sin. Singleness is good, and you should use it to serve the Lord. But if your singleness is leading you into sin, he's saying then you should marry. Find a godly person of the opposite sex and pursue marriage. I can imagine some of you

say, well, look, it's not that simple. I know some of you want to be married, and it hasn't happened. I understand that. I understand that that is painful. I don't know why God holds this back in some cases, but I do know that it isn't because he's being mean. If that's you, I want to say keep trusting him, and keep using the freedoms that you have to serve him while you wait. Recognize, too, that for some, the struggle is the opposite sex bit. Find someone of the opposite sex. You know how God has designed marriage, but your desires push you in a different direction. I want to say, in that situation, those desires can change, and you can pray that the Lord would do that. So don't rule out marriage as he has designed it. But however your desires lead you, if you aren't gifted in the way that Paul is describing here, but you fight every day for purity, God delights in your faithfulness. That is a good thing. The point is this. Whatever God has or doesn't currently have for you, don't waste your singleness by thinking it's inferior, and you have to somehow upgrade to marriage. If you're not married, or you were married, you're a valuable part of this church, just as you are. You don't need to move from that state to some sort of different state as a way of saying that would be what godliness looks like.

Marriage is not essential for godliness. Singleness is good. Serve the Lord. Thirdly, marriage is good. Serve your vows. Serve your marriage vows. Verse 10, to the married I give this charge. Not I, but the Lord. The wife should not separate from her husband.

But if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband, and the husband should not divorce his wife. Now, when Paul says here, not I, but the Lord, he isn't distinguishing his teaching from Jesus as if his words didn't have authority. He's not saying, this is something from the Lord. This is something I've got a bit of a hunch about. It's not that. It's not just his opinion that we can take or leave. No, he is directly applying something that Jesus has taught in the Gospels, Mark 10, for example, when he says, not I, but the Lord. He's directly applying something like that. And he says here, if you're married, stay married. Now, the suggestion here is that the wife is initiating separation, and she's being urged then not to remarry and to reconcile. And the husband is being told he can't divorce in order that he's able to reconcile if his wife is willing.

[20 : 09] Marriage is good. It was established by God as a general good. It's not just a Christian good. And there are plenty of statistics today that prove this. Marriage holds relationships together.

Marriage is best for children. Marriage is especially good for boys who grow up with both parents in their lives. It is also given by God as a picture of the Christian gospel. It is good in that sense.

In Ephesians 5, Paul says that marriage points us to Christ and his bride, the church. And so, in the same way that Christ doesn't leave his bride, Christ doesn't walk out on his marriage, neither should we. And this is true, even verse 12, even verse 12, if your spouse is an unbeliever.

Paul isn't suggesting that a Christian should knowingly marry an unbeliever. That isn't allowed. But the question in Corinth is what happens when somebody is already married and they come to faith in Christ. That's what Paul means. Look at verse 12 when he says, "8 to the unmarried, 10 to the married, 12 to the rest." Surely you're either unmarried or married.

What does he mean, the rest? Well, he's talking there about mixed marriages, people who have come to faith in the context of a marriage that was between two unbelievers. Jesus' teaching in the gospels addressed Jewish men married to Jewish women with a shared understanding of the Bible's teaching on covenants in general and marriage in particular. But the Corinthian church is made up of people who have converted from idolatrous religions. And so, when Paul says, "I, not the Lord," he's applying the marriage teaching from the gospels into this kind of context. It was a context that Jesus didn't have to address." So, he's taking the principle, the teaching from the gospels, and he's applying it into the Corinthian situation. So, verse 12, "If any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband.

[22 : 22] Otherwise, your children will be unclean, but as it is, they are holy." If the unbelieving spouse will stay, Paul says, then stay married. One of the concerns in Corinth, especially with Paul's teaching on how—what he said back in chapter 6 on how sex creates a one-flesh union, one of the concerns was that staying in a marriage when you've become Christian might defile you. But Paul says, no, actually the opposite is the case in marriage. Sex with a prostitute defiles you because it is outside the marriage bond. In fact, an unbeliever who is married to a believer, it goes the other way.

They're sanctified. Verse 14, they're made holy. They benefit from being united to the believer rather than the other way around. This is true of the spouse and any children that you have. It doesn't obviously mean that they are automatically converted. You are only saved through faith in Jesus Christ, but it simply means that God views their marriage union and their household as holy and not defiled.

Paul emphasizes staying together in marriage because marriage is good. Even if you're a Christian and your spouse doesn't share your Christian faith, marriage is good.

Now, this is hard in a culture where marriage is viewed as a convenience, where marriage is viewed as something that we can enter into only for as long as it makes us feel good, and we can get out of it.

We can divorce on the basis of something called no fault. Well, we just didn't fancy it anymore, and so we've decided we're going to divorce. In a culture where that's the case, this kind of teaching is difficult. Remember Adele back in 2021? She left her husband, and then she wrote a song saying that she knows that this is going to damage her son and damage his life, but he should go easy on her.

[24 : 24] What does it say about a culture where a song like that becomes a massive hit, and she gets loads of awards that decorate her for putting this out there. It says that we've lost our way, and it tells us that taking a different course, serving your vows, even when you don't feel like it, is going to be harder and harder to do.

Now, again, while this isn't all there is to say on the matter, Paul does say that there are grounds where divorce is allowed. It isn't encouraged, but it is permitted. The Lord, not Paul, in his teaching on divorce in Matthew 19 verse 9, permits divorce for sexual immorality. Paul now adds to that. If an unbelieving spouse walks out, verse 15, the believer is not enslaved. If they leave, you're free. If you try to stay married, but they walk out, then you're released from the marriage covenant. It's not ideal because, verse 15, God has called you to peace. In the messy world that we live in, staying married to an unbeliever won't be easy. But as far as it depends on you, Paul is saying, with whatever help you can solicit, don't get divorced. In the end, look at verse 16. In the end, you don't know what God might do. However difficult it is, you don't know what God might do. How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? How do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?

Just as God brought you to salvation, He might be using you to bring your spouse to salvation as well. As you embrace God's teaching, being a wife or a husband, according to His design, this might be the means God uses to win your spouse. I've seen this happen. God is very, very gracious.

So I want to say, if this is your situation, stick in, pray on. May the Lord strengthen you. Amen. And again, we mustn't forget, with all of this, there is grace for us in the mess.

Where we have failed, where perhaps others have failed us, the gospel, this table that we're about to come to together holds out forgiveness, cleansing. It holds out hope.

[26 : 41] We shouldn't hear this this morning and have it crush us. The gospel is sufficient to cover everything that we've done wrong, that has been done wrong to us. We hear Paul's side of this conversation.

Some things aren't completely clear, but one thing is, and it's this, just as the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve. So it is for those who follow Him. So whatever situation you're in, serve your spouse, serve the Lord, serve your marriage vows. Let's pray together.

Let's pray together.