

SEXUALITY AND SPIRITUALITY - A LINKAGE?

(sexuality; marriage)

I CORINTHIANS 7

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Manufacturers, advertisers and retailers will tell you: "Sex sells!"
And apparently they are very right.

Magazines as diverse as Time and Moody Monthly or Christianity Today will agree that we live in a sex-obsessed culture.

Authors as different as Harold Robbins and Chuck Swindoll know that sex is of great interest to all Americans.

It seems that people of all ages (7, 17, 37, or 67) have questions about sex.
Some questions are trivial or just sensational but most people have real questions as well - questions that need answers.

What is God's attitude toward sex?
Is it just a necessary evil? Necessary just to propagate the species?

What should be a husband's or a wife's attitude toward sex?

How is a never-married single person supposed to deal with his or her sexuality?

Does God want everyone married? Does he want everyone to remain single?

What is the relationship of formerly married people to sex?

Should Christians get divorced?

The Bible is a very practical book and God deals with those and others subjects in the text we have been and continue to study.

If you will look at Chapter 7:1 you will see that there was a time when a very interesting saying evidently became quite popular:

"It is good for a man not to marry."

What kind of questions or other thoughts pop into your mind when you hear the phrase: "It is good for a man not to marry."

Maybe you think of some of the silly jokes about the merits of bachelorhood.
In our culture there is a half-joking, half-serious attitude that bachelorhood is somehow preferable.

Maybe when you hear the saying you think seriously about some of the practical advantages of being single.

Maybe you think there is something inherently more spiritual about remaining single.

What comes to mind if you knew that the phrase literally read:
"It is good for a man not to touch a woman."

Maybe you think of those days in grade school when to touch a girl meant you might get "girl cooties".

It is very important for us to know exactly what this statement means.

In our English language we will use one word to stand for another:

For example we will speak of the "White House" when we mean the "Presidency" or even the "President"

We will hear "The White House issued a statement today."

So in this first verse, Paul, the author, uses a euphemism to communicate what he means.

The phrase is literally: "It is good for a man not to touch a woman."

The NIV translators chose to use another euphemism:

"It is good for a man not to marry"

In the context it is clear that both of these euphemisms are pointing to what the phrase actually means: "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman."

That is the translation you will find in your NIV marginal note.

The subject is not about legal marriage but about sexual relations.

This is important because understanding that phrase will set the stage for everything that follows.

Do you remember we saw in Chapter Six last week Paul would quote from the Corinthians and then would respond to their quote?

Chapter 6:12 "Everything is permissible for me."

We have the same thing happening here:

As verse one indicates, the Corinthians had written a letter to Paul and in it they had noted several issues they wished he would respond to.

One of the things they wrote was "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman."

When Paul read that he knew there was a great deal of confusion and downright "error" about sex among the Corinthian Christians.

There were two very different attitudes about sex among those Christians.

We saw last week (in chapter 6) there were many who said - "Everything is permissible for me" - anything goes when it comes to sex.

But there were also those in the church who took the opposite attitude: Nothing goes - Sexual relationships even in marriage are wrong.

The idea they had was that abstinence was morally and spiritually superior.

A person would be a better Christian if he or she abstained from sex altogether.

But the argument went even further than that:

Their premise was that sexual relations hinder spirituality.

Therefore they concluded abstaining from sex if married, or never marrying in the first place or getting a divorce if you are married is best.

Now in this chapter Paul will agree that there are some advantages to being single under certain circumstances

but remaining single should be chosen or accepted

not because sex is wrong

but for other reasons which we will look at in a couple of weeks.

This attitude toward sex is unusual for us but in Corinth there were Christians arguing that sex is wrong and therefore marriage is wrong.

They were arguing against sex and marriage.

What a different world we live in.

In our culture sex is heralded as absolutely essential.

We are taught that it is unhealthy to not engage sexually.

We are taught about the dangers of sexual repression.

And in our culture, in spite of our jokes about it, marriage is still strongly believed to be the ticket to happiness.

I find it interesting that we see in their culture and in ours two sides of the same coin.

They saw sex and marriage as bad and they just couldn't live with it.

We see sex and marriage as indispensable and we just can't live without it.

How many Christians are waiting for their marital status or their sexual relationships to change before they can get on with life?

Another interesting attitude factors into this.

In spite of our fascination and desire for marriage and sex there are still some Christians who think of sex as somehow inherently bad.

Is there some of that Corinthian thinking still in our minds 2000 years later?

On one side of the insert in your program today is an outline of the chapter at which we will be looking.

Please look at it with me.

Some of the Corinthian Christians had come up with the belief that it was ideal, it was best, if a Christian was single and abstinent.

They thought it was spiritually superior to abstain from sexual relations even if a person was married.

Chapter 7 is Paul's response to that kind of thinking.

He will refute that kind of thinking in reference to those who are already married.

He will refute it in reference to those who were formerly married.

He will refute it in reference to those who are married and thinking of divorce.

He will refute it in reference to those who have never been married.

He will refute it in reference to those who are engaged to be married.

He will use 40 verses to soundly trounce such erroneous ideas and bogus behavior.

Some of you who have read this chapter casually may think that it is all about Paul's preference for the single life - and his wish that we were all single.

My hope is that from this week's study, and the next three, you will come to understand that while Paul does express his own preference for singleness, and that while he does laud the advantages and acceptability of being single (something which many Christians, single and married, today need to hear), he nowhere denigrates marriage or sex and in fact he supports both as not only acceptable but good.

Paul's major objective in this chapter is not to promote singleness but to refute the erroneous, debilitating and God-dishonoring attitude of some toward sex and marriage.

And in the process he gives some very helpful insights into relationships.

Over the next two weeks and then on Feb 12 we will look at three sections of this chapter in detail and touch on the others.

Next week we will look at verses 10-16 and the subject of divorce.

The following week we will go back to the first 9 verses and talk about those who are married and the formerly married.

Then on the 12th we will discuss the issue of singleness.

But today I want you to look with me at what I have called "The real issue!"

I have said that Paul's major objective in this chapter is to refute the thinking of some of the Corinthians -

To refute their idea that sexual abstinence was central to spiritual health and progress.

And to refute it Paul puts that kind of thinking up against a much higher kind of thinking - a much more accurate kind of thinking.

The heart of the passage, the central idea of the passage, the idea from God through Paul, that puts the lie to the idea of the Corinthians is given in verses 17-24.

READ v 17, 20, 24

Do you know what I hear in all three of those verses?
A PRINCIPLE - "Live the Christian life where you are."

You might read these verses and be tempted to think they mean God appointed you, or called you, to a specific situation and you must remain in that situation.

But verse 20 helps us most to understand Paul's point is not that you were called to be a slave, or you were called to be single, or you were called to be uncircumcised but that when you were called, meaning when you were saved, you were in a particular situation and that situation doesn't have to change in order for you to follow Christ.

When we read the entire section we find that the emphasis is not on staying in a particular situation (for in verse 21 Paul will say of the slave, "if you can gain your freedom, do so") -

The emphasis is not on staying in a particular situation but the emphasis is on the attitude you maintain and the things you do while in that situation.

In verse 17 it says, "each one should retain the place in life that the Lord assigned him. That can just as correctly, though loosely, be translated, "Each one should walk or live the Christian life in the place where he was when saved."

Likewise verse 20 says each one should "remain in" or as we translate that same word in John 15 - "each one should "abide" in.

"Remaining" or "abiding" has to do with more than just staying put - it has to do with a quality of life.

Or as the last part of verse 19 says, "Keeping God's commandments is what counts."

So again, I remind you, the emphasis in these verses is not on staying put in your circumstances but the emphasis is on the attitude you have in whatever circumstances you are.

Another way of getting at the meaning of this is to say it this way:

"Stop thinking that changing your circumstances will change your ability to grow spiritually or be more obedient to God."

Remember the lie that some Corinthians believed?

"It is good for a man (or a woman) to not have sexual relations."

Look at the first 6 verses of the chapter and see the application of that lie:

"If I am married I can grow better spiritually if I didn't have to have sex." If I could change my circumstances things would be better.

Look at verses 10-16 and see the application of that lie:

"If I could just be single again I could grow better spiritually."

If my circumstances changed I could follow God better.

Look at verses 25-35 and see that others were probably thinking that if only they could get married they would be able to get on with life as God meant it.

The whole chapter is about change - Each thought "If only my circumstances would change I would be better able to follow God."

Paul says, stop thinking like that - stop thinking that changing your circumstances will make you a better Christian.

Now to make that point he uses two illustrations: do you see them in verses 18 and 21?
IN verse 18 circumcision is the illustration.

Circumcision was the greatest religious barrier that existed in that day.

According to both kinds of people in the world there were only two kinds of people in the world:

There were the circumcised - the Jews - the odd super-spiritual, super-legalistic Jews - hated by most.

And there were the unccircumcised - the rest of humanity - the heathen, those without God - shunned if not hated by the Jews.

The great temptation would be for either the circumcised or the uncircumcised to think that for anyone else to be a true Christian they had to be like them.

The Jewish Christians would think that the uncircumcised had to be circumcised to be a real Christian.

And the Gentile Christians would think that a circumcised Jew would have to renounce his circumcision in order to be a real Christian.

Paul's point is that neither is true.

Your spiritual life and growth is not dependent on the circumstance of even what is perceived as important an issue as circumcision.

If you were circumcised when you were called by God, when you were saved, don't let that stop you from growing.

If you were uncircumcised when you were called by God, when you were saved, don't let that stop you from growing.

We may not identify very well with that illustration so we get another one.

What's the illustration in verse 21? Slavery

We may not have ever been a slave but most of us still have some fairly strong emotions about the issue.

This is a powerful illustration.

Think again of what the principle is:

"Live the Christian life where you are."

"Stop thinking that changing your circumstances will make you a better Christian or enable you to grow more spiritually."

Paul writes, "Were you a slave when you were called, when you became a Christian? Don't let it trouble you" - don't let it make you anxious about your Christianity.

Now if circumcision was perceived as the greatest religious barrier in that day and age, then certainly slavery was perceived as the greatest social barrier.

Now this didn't work both ways like circumcision did but both slaves and freedmen would wonder how a person could possibly be a Christian or at least a good one if he was still a slave.

Even down into the 19th century there were ignorant Christians who wondered if certain slaves of certain races could even be Christians at all.

And evidently there were slaves as well who thought "If only I could be free then I could really be a Christian, then I could really follow God."

But what is Paul's point?

Slavery or freedom is not the central issue - you can grow in Christ wherever you are.

Again remember, the point of the passage is not that a good Christian never changes his or her circumstances.

Look at the end of verse 21 - READ

Paul makes it clear that if there is opportunity for your circumstances to change and you would prefer a different situation - you are free to change.

Again the principle is not that you must stay in a certain situation but that your situation, your circumstances do not determine your spiritual growth.

God's call on our lives so radically changes our perspective that our external circumstances (whether we are married or single, Jewish or Gentile in background, or slave or free) mean little.

Success is no longer controlled by how much money I have.

Contentment is no longer controlled by my marital status.

Happiness is no longer controlled by the presence or absence of sex.

Hope, anticipation, and joy are no longer controlled by what happens each day in terms of money, health, and other circumstances but are controlled by my relationship to Jesus - who will never fail.

When we are born again we are given an eternal perspective and no longer are we bound by just a temporal one.

Our ability to grow spiritually, our ability to obey Christ, to be Christ's person, to share Christ with others, to experience the joy of knowing God is not dictated by our social, or economic or marital status.

Circumstances do not determine our ability to follow Christ.

Spiritually we are no better off in one circumstance or another.
"Live the Christian life where you are."

It is that perspective God through Paul will bring to bear on all the relationships discussed in this chapter:

Are you married? Live the Christian life where you are.

Are you single? Live the Christian life where you are.

Prayer:

O God that is one of the hardest things for us.

You call on us to have an eternal perspective - to see things with new eyes - to understand what is truly most important - to live above our circumstances.

But we are so earth-bound, so myopic, so controlled by our circumstances that we are convinced we are victims - and we cry out, O God change things so we can live for you.

God I want to be a man who learns to please you in all circumstances, a man who is faithful in any situation, a man who is spiritually contented where ever and in whatever I am.

I also ask God that in regard to our relationships you help us gain a new perspective - to realize that no one other than us or no thing else needs to change in order for us to live the Christian life you have called us to live.

AMEN

Benediction:

And now may the Spirit which was in Christ Jesus be in us, enabling us to know God's will and empowering us to do God's will. AMEN