

**PREFACE**

Back in the early eighties, when, Linda and I returned to the church, and I was being disciplined by my good friend, he and I would meet weekly in his office for Bible study. We would select a book of the Bible and work our way through it together, and we would typically select a handy study guide to help keep us on-track. In 1985 we studied First Corinthians, and our booklet was a so-called “inductive” study published by Harold Shaw Publishers.

One of the characteristics of an inductive study is that one limits oneself to the book being studied; that is, as we studied First Corinthians we were supposed to *remain* in First Corinthians, referencing no other passages.

The passage before us today, as well as our previous session, demonstrate the weakness of such a method. For example, consider just the first two verses of Chapter Seven.

**Read 1 Corinthians 7:1-2.**

If we looked nowhere else, we could logically conclude that

- the apostle Paul (hence God Himself) believes the ideal for any and every man is to never have sexual relations with a woman;
- but since there is sin in this fallen world, with its inherent temptations, this would be one reason—and probably the predominant reason—for some individuals to marry.

From this, one could easily conclude that marriage is little more than a safety valve for those who are unable to control their insatiable sexual urges. From what Paul just wrote in Chapter Six (v16), we would know that having sex with a prostitute means that “the two become one flesh,” but, since we are not permitted to reference the passage in Genesis 2:24, we would not know that the original text being quoted refers to a husband and wife—and we would not know that before sin and sexual immorality even existed in the garden paradise, God inaugurated the institution of marriage.

Limiting ourselves to Paul’s narrow counsel regarding marriage in First Corinthians, we would not know of the proverb, “He who finds a wife finds a good thing / And obtains favor from the LORD” (Proverbs 18:22), nor would we be privy to how Paul in his letter to the Ephesians shows how believer’s marriage is the beautiful earthly picture of Christ’s union with His church, or how the writer to the Hebrews says that marriage is to be held “in honor among all.”

## Read Hebrews 13:4.

That word translated “honor” or “honorable” (*timios*) means precious. Those who are in a marriage, as well as society at large (“among all”), are to consider their union to be a *precious* thing—the same word Peter used to describe the blood of Christ.

## Read 1 Peter 1:17-19.

Thus, God’s word as a whole both teaches and illustrates in the lives of the saints (e.g., [Priscilla and Aquila, working together in ministry](#)) that marriage is a good and honorable state for man and woman, and not just as a release valve, or stop-gap against sexual immorality.

In our last session we learned that Paul is now, until almost the end of this epistle, responding to queries and issues brought to his attention in a letter directly from the church in Corinth. Somewhere in this letter they stated a maxim that was informing their belief system: “it is good for a man not to touch [i.e., [have sexual intercourse with](#)] a woman.” Although celibate himself, Paul spends much of this chapter rebutting that slogan.

## Read 1 Corinthians 7:1-5.

v2

If we care to read or listen to the news or commentary on events, every day we hear individuals with an agenda misquoting and lifting someone’s words out of context, thus leaving out the critical *why* someone said what they did, and distorting their meaning. The apostle Paul has gotten a bad rap from many commentators who have said, for just one example, “that Paul regarded marriage as a necessary evil due to the weakness of the flesh” (Lietzmann in Garland).

We can’t lose sight of the *why* Paul writes what he has: he is rebutting those who claim that is is a good and righteous thing that even married couples abstain from sexual relations. Look at the beginning of v5: “Stop depriving one another”!

*But because of immoralities,*

Only the NASB renders this literally (it is in the plural: sexual immoralities), which seems to point back to the last paragraph of Chapter Six and the issue of visiting prostitutes.

On the surface this situation in Corinth may seem rather odd. Here we have people, supposedly Christians, who considered themselves so “spiritual,” so advanced on a spiritual plane, that the body had become immaterial—to the point that they were espousing the elimination of sexual relations even *within* marriage (“it is good for a man not to touch a woman”). If that were so, why were they frequenting prostitutes? Let me suggest a few possibilities.

- If only one of the marriage partners subscribed to this philosophy (e.g., the so-called “eschatological women,” women who thought “of themselves as having already realized the ‘resurrection from the dead’ by being ‘in spirit’ and thus already as the angels” [Fee]) then the other partner might be inclined to find release elsewhere.
- Even if both subscribed to it, they could draw a distinction between a “pure,” spiritual marriage and satisfying the flesh with a prostitute. After all, the body was nothing, and it was just sex.
- Oddly enough, however, this could also be explained by the tendency to find satisfaction in another place even when we have determined it is “good” to prohibit it in one place. For example, just the other evening, in an old rerun of a *Tonight Show* episode, Johnny Carson’s guest was Robert Blake (*Baretta*) who, as always, made a point of holding an unlit cigarette in his hand because he had quit smoking. But in this episode he admitted that after quitting smoking cigarettes he chewed tobacco for several years. Then, discovering that this could cause mouth cancer, he stopped that practice, only to periodically unravel a cigarette so as to chew on the tobacco. Deciding that smoking was bad for him, he chewed plug tobacco; deciding *that* was bad for him, he began chewing the tobacco in cigarettes. Here is how David Garland applies this phenomenon to the situation in Corinth:

Paul takes for granted that the only rightful place for sexual intercourse is within marriage and that those who marry are sexually active. For them to attempt precipitously to suppress awakened sexual desires will only expose them to a sexual undertow that will tug them into a sea of temptation, where they will ultimately drown.

*each man is to have his own wife, and each woman is to have her own husband.*

The solution to all these problems, as Paul sees it, is that everyone who is married is to enjoy sexual pleasures within that marriage. In v1, the word “touch” was a euphemism for sex; in v2, the word “have” is another common Greek euphemism for sex. And just in case that is insufficiently clear, he fleshes this out, as it were, in v3.

### v3

*The husband must fulfill his duty to his wife, and likewise also the wife to her husband.*

Note the *mutuality* in this passage. Not only is it not true that Paul was a “woman hater,” or was of the opinion that marriage was only good for the prevention of fornication and adultery, but he saw marriage as a precious thing; his was God’s view, that marriage was an inseparable bond between two equals. Yes, there was the God-ordained hierarchy within a marriage, but aside from that a marriage should be built on and held together by mutual respect, mutual affection, mutual love.

Also note that the emphasis here is not on *taking*, but *giving*. In accordance with the time and culture in which he wrote, Paul could have said something like, *The husband should be reasonably nice to his wife, and the wife must submit to the demands of her husband, whatever they are. Her duty is to always be available for him.* Instead, the language is balanced and mutual, and, as Fee notes, about giving, not taking: “Paul’s emphasis is not on ‘You owe me,’ but on ‘I owe you.’”

We have to keep in mind the context of this counsel: Back in our first apartment—a renovated one-car garage (\$90 per month)—during the first few months of our marriage, if I had read this verse I would have been incredulous: *The husband must fulfill his duty to his wife? I’m just back from a six-month Vietnam cruise, freshly married to the most beautiful eighteen-year-old girl in the world. Are you kidding? I’ll be more than happy to fulfill my duty to my wife!* But Paul’s command is not to teenagers in the twentieth century, but to sanctimonious, spiritualized idiots in the first century who were intentionally withholding their conjugal duty from each other because they were of the mistaken belief that this made them more pious. But v4 is for *all* of us.

### v4

*The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; and likewise also the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does.*

Now the perspective, at least as regards conjugal rights, is reversed. In v3 the emphasis is on one spouse *giving* to the other; in v4 the emphasis is on each spouse having the right to *take*—having power, control over the other’s body. Here we revisit the same word Paul used in v6:12, when he wrote that “...[he would] not be mastered by anything.”

**exousiazō** = from <G1849> (*exousia*); **to control :- exercise authority upon, bring under the (have) power of.**

This is not contradictory, but balanced; both are true. In a healthy marriage—that is in a marriage obedient to God’s ideal—each partner has the obligation to give, *and* the right to take. When we combine this with Paul’s thoughts in Chapter Six (“Or do you not know that the one who joins himself to a prostitute is one body with her? For He says, ‘The two shall become one flesh’”[6:16]), we see pictured not just the *mutuality*, but the *exclusivity* of God’s definition of marriage.

Only the husband is granted this power over his wife’s body, and only the wife is granted this power over her husband’s body. God’s idea of marriage is that of a perfect circle: all-encompassing, self-contained, exclusive, focused upon each other.

As perfect as this is, it contains what Bengel called an “elegant paradox.”

*J. F. B. (paraphrasing Bengel):* A paradox. She hath not power over her body, and yet it is “her own.” The oneness of body in which marriage places husband and wife explains this. The one complements the other. Neither without the other realizes the perfect ideal of man. [Johann Albrecht Bengel (24 June 1687 - 2 November 1752)]

The only way these verses can be rightly evaluated and applied is in the context of the immediate passage, as well as the context of God’s word as a whole. All the epistles, specifically, and the tenor of God’s word as a whole, speak to the mutuality, exclusivity (“one flesh”) and beauty of believers’ marriage—in stark contrast to the civil or pagan marriages of the time.

The immediate context is in response to the bizarre behavior in Corinth of a married partner either denying conjugal rights to his or her spouse, or both of them agreeing that this would no longer be part of their marriage. To this, at the beginning of v5, Paul commands, “Stop depriving one another”!

And this is where we will pick it up in our next session.