

PREFACE

As we have and continue to see in this extended passage, the apostle Paul is way ahead of his times with his counsel and commands to the married and the unmarried. In many respects his counsel to the Corinthians fits much better into our time than the first century. For example, those who claim that women are still lacking the fullness of “equal rights” they deserve, should applaud what the apostle states in vv2-3 (and, as we will see in a moment, v5).

Read 1 Corinthians 7:2-3.

What we see in those two verses and in v5 is balance, equity, mutual authority in marriage—everything one would expect from a union in which “two become one flesh.” Yet in some respects he would find himself at odds with many today—especially those on the left. Take, for example, his command in v4.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:4.

Still balanced and equal, but the radical feminist and pro-abortion crowd is going to have a problem with this. *How dare you claim that my husband has power over my body! It's my body to do with what I please—even to take the life of the baby living inside it.*

Read 1 Corinthians 7:5-7.

v5

Verse 5 does not begin a new thought, but flows out of the previous verses. As mentioned previously, it is apparent that the Corinthian congregation included married couples who, by misinterpreting the apostles' teaching *and* by adopting certain pagan practices, were “spiritualizing” their union to such an extent that they had, in some cases, removed its more physical components. To this the apostle commands, “Stop it!”

Stop depriving one another...

Read 1 Corinthians 6:7-8.

That word translated “defraud” in Chapter Six is the same word translated “deprive” in v5; *apostereo* is a derogatory word for taking away what rightfully belongs to another. Then Paul sets up an exception to the command, one he offers as a “concession” (v6).

except by agreement, for a time,

He allows this concession on two conditions:

1. That it only be interrupted by mutual consent; both husband and wife must agree. Here, in the first century, Paul is breaking new ground in the marital relationship. The wife would not typically be part of such a decision; the husband would simply dictate what was going—or not going—to transpire.
2. “For a time” is better rendered, as in the ESV, “for a limited time.” The idea is that this would not be open-ended, and certainly not a permanent state; it would be only for a set, specified period of time.

Why?

so that you may devote yourselves to prayer,

We must be careful not to read too much into this. Paul is *not* saying that to effectively pray one must be ceremonially “clean” as Israel was commanded before they could approach Mount Sinai upon which the Lord God would visit them.

Read Exodus 19:14-15.

Nor is he saying marital relations are *by nature* a hindrance to prayer. As David Garland puts it, “The spiritual life does not cut a person off from the natural order of creation.” As Paul will address soon, there are those given by God the gift of celibacy, but that gift was (and is) not common. Paul’s point is that extended celibacy within a marriage is against the natural—and God-ordained—order of marriage.

But if both husband and wife agree that a period (implied, brief) of focused, even intense prayer is called for, they may set aside their physical relationship for the duration.

and come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.

Adam Clarke: [regarding “lack of self-control,” or “incontinence” (KJV)]
want of strength to regulate one’s desires or appetites.

The NIV and ESV do a better job of capturing Paul’s emphasis; here is the ESV:
but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. (emphasis added)

A “but” is stronger than an “and.” To paraphrase, *Sure, there are times when a couple should come together for a brief time of focused prayer during which the more physical aspects of marriage are dispensed with. But beware of extending this for too long, as then your natural and God-ordained drive may be sidetracked by Satan’s temptations.*

Sidebar: Those using one of the King James versions may note that I haven't mentioned "fasting," which is included along with prayer in those translations—NKJV: "...that you may give yourselves to fasting and prayer"—but left out in the other common translations. Garland explains, "The omission of fasting is attested by the earliest and most reliable witnesses. It has weak manuscript support and probably was added by later scribes because fasting was an interest of the early church."

v6

But this I say by way of concession, not of command.

Verse 6 is another pivot point: It both concludes Paul's thoughts in v5 (Fee), and serves as a segue into his discussion about celibacy in the upcoming verses (Garland), contrasting the God-given *gift* of celibacy with forced celibacy within a marriage. What the apostle has described in v5— mutual, temporary abstinence for periods of devotion to prayer—he terms a "concession," a compromise, as it were, meeting them halfway; they are *not* to consider it a "command."

v7

In v7 Paul foreshadows a lengthier discussion on individual gifts he will conduct in Chapters Twelve to Fourteen. Before that, however, he expresses his wish that all people had *his* gift.

Yet I wish that all men were even as I myself am.

It is easy for casual readers of portions of Chapter Seven to conclude that the apostle holds a low opinion of marriage—and, by extension, the conjugal rights enjoyed there. But not so.

Garland: One can get the impression that Paul thinks that marriage is only a second-best choice for the "burners" [vv8-9]. That is not his intention. The issue is not what is the highest "good" but what is good for each individual Christian as he or she understands his or her endowment and calling by God.

More on this in a moment. Paul here speaks of true celibacy—not just the single state. What he wishes for all is what he has: the special gift from God that is *freedom from desiring sexual relations*. For someone in Paul's position, with his burden for evangelizing the known world, this was a special gift indeed. He was free of the responsibility of supporting a wife and family; he was free of the desire and temptation for physical release. Thus he could give all of himself, body and soul, to God and his calling.

By saying this Paul is not suggesting that he has the superior gift, and that literally every person on earth should have the same gift of celibacy. This statement is best seen as a response to the Corinthians' misguided effort for forced celibacy within marriage. By saying this he is also saying that these individuals do *not* have the gift

of celibacy, so they should stop trying to force such constraints on their marriage. Then he quickly adds an important “but.”

However, each man has his own gift from God, one in this manner, and another in that.

We will consider this important truth in its fullness later in this letter; for now let’s narrow its scope to this immediate context. What is stated here is something to which I fear we do not give sufficient attention.

Paul considers his celibacy a *charisma*—a divine gift. And considering the natural condition for men and women in this world, one can only conclude that he is correct. Considering man’s nature, true celibacy can only be a gift from God. In this context it is to this that Paul refers when he writes, “one in *this* manner.”

Now, on one level Paul is stating, in the second half of v7, the obvious: one person has this gift from God, and another person has a different gift from God. Very true, and later in this letter Paul will make clear his position that one gift is not necessarily superior over another. They are all important in kingdom life. But there seems to be an extra level here, one reflected in the KJVs and the NASB.

...one in this manner, and another in that.

I looked everywhere for some confirmation, or even mention, of what I was hearing here, but alas to no avail. Thus you are free to consider this with the feather weight it rightly deserves.

What I hear in these translations is the supremacy and centrality of God in this matter of divine gifts. That is, God not only dispenses the gifts, *He is to be the reason and focus of how they are employed*. Every spiritual gift handed down from above is to be used for Him, to His glory—not ours and not others. Others may and should *benefit* from the employment of these gifts—for example, I believe Christians for the last two thousand years have benefited from Paul’s gift of celibacy—but they are to be dedicated to the One from whom they came. As he puts it in Romans:

For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen. (Romans 11:36)

So we might paraphrase this, *However, each man has his own gift from God, one serves Him in this manner, and another serves Him in another manner*. Let’s close with a passage by the apostle Peter which summarizes this nicely.

Read 1 Peter 4:10-11.

Paul was given, by God, singleness and celibacy as divine gifts. Others are given, by God, marriage as a divine gift. *All* are to be used for Him.