

On Marriage and Singleness (1)

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 0 0] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 21st of May 2000. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled On Marriage and Singleness, Part 1 and is from 1 Corinthians 7, verses 1-24.

You may like to have open the passage that was read from 1 Corinthians 7. It's in the Black Bibles on page 929. This is a difficult passage and a controversial one, but one that is important for us to look at.

And this week and next week in the morning services we'll be looking at this chapter. And I'll pray that God will help us now as we read and look at this chapter. A God we pray that your word will be clear for us and give us wills to follow it so that we may bring glory to Jesus Christ.

Amen. You don't need me to tell you that sex is not far from the headlines usually and it's not far from our hearts usually. Our age is a libertine age.

[1 : 1 6] It is a permissive or the Greeks would call it an epicurean age where indulgence and freedom are the slogans of our society. Sex before marriage is the norm and adultery is becoming even more so as well.

Soap operas portray happy promiscuity which never really exists in practice and it's rare to see a film these days without either a sexual scene or certainly without sexual innuendos.

Richard Pratt the philanthropist's adultery was front page news in the age recently but he wasn't condemned for it. It was just news. The most significant technology developments for the internet are those that are being produced by the companies that market pornography.

A major feature of the advertisements on television on the billboards at the end of our freeways and at the side of our streets and bus stations and so on usually focuses on some aspect of lust.

For example the Windsor Smith shoe advertisements and usually the lust has got nothing to do with the product that's being marketed. In our society it would be fair to say that the pendulum is almost at full stretch at the libertine promiscuous end.

[2 : 3 6] Sex is good anywhere, anyhow and with anyone. No limits. And against such a view traditionally the church, God, the Bible are being portrayed and are portrayed as being really rather wowserish.

And for too long I think in church life sex has been a taboo topic where it has been discussed in various traditions sex has been argued that it is for the procreation of children and it is a necessary evil for that purpose alone.

And certainly in times past and even in present in some church traditions that is the church has been guilty of such a view. The church has often regarded the ascetic, monastic, celibate life as being the ideal.

And so it's advocated in some traditions the celibacy of priests and monks and nuns for example. And often this chapter that we're looking at 1 Corinthians 7 has been used in support of such views.

Well maybe as we read these verses and look at them they might just surprise you about what they actually say. The philosophy of ancient Greece and this letter was written to Corinth in ancient Greece regarded the physical body as being rather unimportant compared to the spirit or the soul.

[4 : 05] If the body is ultimately unimportant then one of two things could be done with it. Either you could indulge it that is eat, drink, be merry, have sex your body doesn't matter it ends when you die the spirit or soul is what matters so indulge your body do what you like to it.

Or the other option is the Stoic option that is you deny your body self-discipline, self-denial, abstinence and so on.

The former is called in Greek philosophy the Epicurean the latter is the Stoic. And ancient Corinth to which this letter was addressed in about early 50s AD was a very liberal libertine Epicurean society.

It was promiscuous, it was a mixture of all sorts of cultures, it was a major trade centre of the ancient world, temples were there and as part of the temple worship there would be some sexual immorality and sexual conduct as well.

St Paul has addressed himself to that excess of libertinism in the previous chapters of this letter. He's condemned the sexual immorality in the church, he's rebuked the Corinthians not only for that immorality but also for their boasting and condoning of it.

[5 : 28] But now he tackles the other extreme for there were some in the Corinthian church that were not libertines, they were at the opposite end, the Stoics or the ascetics, they denied any form of sexual activity, they thought it was evil, and it should be forbidden.

And it's those people that this chapter addresses. He begins the chapter by quoting them. These are not his own words, he's quoting their view, they've written him a letter, he's replying to their letter.

So the chapter begins, chapter 7 verse 1, now concerning the matters about which you wrote, and then he quotes what they have said, it is well for a man not to touch a woman. Now their quote is not meaning it is well for a man not to marry a woman, some ancient English translations had that wrongly translated, but rather to touch a woman was a euphemism for having sex with her.

So some of the Corinthian church have written to St. Paul saying this is our view, support us in this view, that is, it is well that a man does not have sexual relations with a woman. they are advocating self-denial, abstinence, discipline, no pleasure in life.

And that's what Paul addresses here. And his response may surprise some of us. He says that sexual activity between a married husband and wife is not only essential, but is good and proper.

[6 : 58] So he says that because of cases of sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. He doesn't mean there that each person should be married, but rather that in effect each married person should have sexual relations with his own wife, that is, not with all sorts of women, with his own wife, and each wife should have sexual relations with her husband.

But that's it. He's actually stating here a case for monogamous sexual activity within marriage. Notice too how male and female are completely mutual here.

There's no sense in which the male is the dominant partner, the male is in control or anything like that. He says, the husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights and likewise the wife to her husband.

For 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. There's no sexism there at all. It's absolutely mutual.

It might be said that what's being argued for here is the conjugal rights. But actually what he's arguing for is conjugal giving. That is, the married person's body, if you like, belongs to their spouse.

[8 : 19] And they have a responsibility in marriage in effect to offer their body for sexual relations to their husband or their wife. Notice too that there is no inkling of sex purely for procreation of children.

In fact, the implication of this paragraph is that sex within marriage is for pleasure. And I think it would be very hard really in the end, although some Christian traditions do, I think it's hard in the end to sustain the argument that contraception should be forbidden for Christian people.

So for those of you who are married, these verses address you. Seek the sexual fulfillment of your spouse.

Don't withhold yourself. Don't deprive your husband or wife of yourself for sexual relations. Paul says that in verse 5. Do not deprive one another.

And then he allows the possibility of a short period of time of abstinence. Maybe he says in verse 5 for prayer or some other religious reason, but then come together again.

[9 : 29] But he's not commanding abstinence. He says in verse 6, this is a concession, not a command. In fact, it seems to me that Paul's preference would be that if you are married, you ought not to stop sexual relations in effect for any purpose, even if it is a purpose of prayer.

If married people are not seeking each other's sexual fulfillment, then Paul says the lack of sexual activity will make you more vulnerable to sexual temptation.

He says at the end of verse 5, you must come together again so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. One of Satan's greatest temptations is illicit sexual activity.

It is a major cause of the breakdown of marriage and the breakdown of Christian marriage. It is a major cause of the failure of Christian ministry and of weak churches as well.

And one reason why people are so vulnerable to sexual, illicit sexual activity is if their marriage sexual life is somehow not working or they're not engaging in sexual activity in marriage.

[10 : 46] The implication of what Paul is saying here is that when you withdraw from sexual activity that is legitimate within marriage, then you are weak when facing temptation for other sexual activity.

The sex drive is powerful. Don't underestimate it. Paul's acknowledging that here. Don't think that you are stronger than you really are. It's no coincidence, I think, that cases of adultery are more prevalent amongst people who are travelling with business than those who are staying at home.

For when you're away from your marriage partner, you are much more vulnerable and weaker in the face of sexual temptation. That's just one amongst a number of reasons, I think.

So if you are a person who is away from your husband or your wife for some period of time, then take precautions not to be vulnerable to temptation. Don't go overseas or travel with your work or take your spouse with you or travel with a colleague so that you can be accountable to each other for your activity and behaviour while you're away from your husband or your wife.

I know of ministers who will not go away to speak at conferences or attend conferences unless they go either with their wife or husband or they go with a church colleague so that they can be mutually accountable for each other because they know the risks and the temptations for when they are travelling.

[12 : 13] We have to be honest with ourselves, we have to know ourselves and we have to act responsibly if we are to be faithful Christian people. So there are some instructions, if you like, to married people.

St. Paul was single. It may have been that he'd been married. It may be that when he was converted to Christianity his wife deserted him on the grounds of faith.

It may well be that his wife had died and that he was a widower. But whatever the situation and we don't know for certain, St. Paul at the time of writing this letter was single and he says in verse 7, I wish that all were as I myself am but each has a particular gift from God, one having one kind and another a different kind.

Paul is acknowledging here that singleness and marriage are really in the end equally valid and equally honourable states for Christians to be in.

One is not to be prized more than another. He's not saying all should be single nor is he saying all should be married. It is quite possibly the case that the Corinthians who were advocating no sexual activity were using St. Paul as an example.

[13 : 32] They were saying to the other Corinthians we shouldn't engage in sexual activity. St. Paul is our model. He's single. He didn't have sex. We should be like him. And Paul's saying yes in one sense it would be great if everybody was single but they're not.

Each has a different gift. Some are single. Some are married. And each is equally honourable. Now that I think is something that the church ought to heed again.

It seems to me that often church life prizes marriage and family far above being single. And I know that in my own experience of being single over the last ten years many people have indicated or implied or joked that in some way seems to suggest that being single is second rate.

so you get invited to a meal and they have to find another token single person to balance up the table and things like that. Now I think the church needs to be fair in an equally welcoming single and married people.

And I think Paul is indicating that at the end of verse 7 as well. Then he turns his attention to the widows. Verse 8 begins to the unmarried and the widows but the word for unmarried is masculine plural and probably it's the word that the Greeks used for widowers.

[14 : 53] There doesn't seem to have been a technical word for widower in ancient Greek. So I think what he's in effect saying are to the widowers the male people who've been widowed and to the widows the females who have lost their husbands.

I say that it is well for them to remain unmarried as I am. Probably the people who've written this letter to St. Paul in advocating Christians should not have sexual activity have said that if you have lost your wife or husband because they've died then you ought not to have sexual activity and get remarried stay single.

And Paul is saying that's fair enough it is okay to remain unmarried. But you don't have to remain unmarried he says. And in verse 9 he says it's a slightly difficult verse if they are not practicing self-control they should marry for it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion.

Paul I think is addressing here not the people who are struggling in remaining single after the loss of their spouse but rather those who perhaps are having sexual relations with somebody else but have not remarried.

Now it may be that they haven't remarried because they feel guilty at that whatever the reason we're not certain. Paul is saying it's okay to get married again and continue sexual relations within the context of marriage.

[16 : 17] So get married. Don't burn is really what it said at the end of verse 9. I don't think it actually means to burn with passion. I think what Paul is in fact implying is that if you are having sexual relations with somebody but you're not married then you will burn with shame or guilt if you do not rectify that situation.

Well the next issue that he turns his attention to from verse 12 onwards sorry verse 10 onwards is the issue of separation and divorce and if the issues that he's already dealt with in this chapter are tricky and controversial this is even more so.

It is a thorny issue for Christians not least in recent years and balancing God's standards for marriage and the reality of the world is not an easy thing to do and balancing God's standards and pastoral care is not an easy thing to do.

The hard attitude that says divorce separation is always wrong and forbidden for Christians has no doubt turned many people away from God and the church but at the other extreme the view that in effect turns a blind eye to separation and divorce seems to diminish God's standards too far.

So what does St. Paul here say? To the married I give this command not I but the Lord that is he acknowledges that Jesus himself has spoken about this issue the wife should not separate from her husband and skipping to the end of the bracket and the husband should not divorce his wife it's mutual there's no sexism here either if she does separate he says in the bracket in verse 11 let her remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband that is Paul acknowledges that divorce and separation are below the ideal that God sets for people in this world marriage is the ideal marriage that is lifelong and faithful but he acknowledges that it's not always the case sometimes there is separation reconciliation should be kept as the goal when there is separation Paul here acknowledges

[18 : 48] Jesus' words as I've said Jesus had spoken as we heard in the second reading today about these same sort of issues divorce and adultery he spoke about it on several occasions one reason why marriage is prized so much by God is because it is the model for his relationship with his people so in the Old and the New Testaments the way God relates to his people Israel in the Old Testament the church in the New Testament is as a husband for a wife and the Bible is consistent from beginning to end that God is utterly faithful with his people always without failure regardless of their faithlessness regardless of the fact that his people turn away from him and worship other gods in effect committing spiritual adultery does not in any way diminish God's own faithfulness for his people so he sets the model for human marriage and in fact that link is made explicit in passages like

Ephesians 5 God's faithfulness for his people is the model for Christian marriage it is to be faithful lifelong and committed without exception that's the standard that God himself models and sets Jesus acknowledged one possibility for divorce on the grounds of unchastity or adultery when a partner in effect has an affair maybe even leaves for another person so therefore the person who is left behind is I think in Jesus words free to not bound by that relationship reconciliation is impossible and free to remarry Paul in these verses adds another possibility for remarriage after divorce it's not a possibility that really existed when Jesus spoke even 20 years before Paul

Paul's situation that he describes is in verse 12 to the rest I say and I not the Lord that is not saying that this is just my advice he's saying Jesus didn't speak about this topic but I'm speaking about it it carries the same authority if any believer has a wife who's an unbeliever and she consents to live with him he should not divorce her and if any woman has a husband who's an unbeliever and he consents to live with her she should not divorce him that is he's addressing the situation where there is a Christian person married to a non-Christian person that's a fairly common thing in Paul's day as the Christian gospel spread through the ancient world a husband or a wife might be converted and turn from pagan ways or Jewish ways to place their faith in Jesus Christ and it may well be that their spouse does not follow suit so you have a Christian married to an unbeliever that's not uncommon today there are many of you

I know whose husbands or wives are not Christians what do you do with your unconverted partner some people in Corinth advocated that Christians should leave their unconverted partners they should initiate separation or divorce on the grounds that their husband or their wife was not a Christian and it may well be the reason for that from the Old Testament where the people of Israel were forbidden to intermarry with people from pagan nations and it may be that these Corinthian people were advocating that by remaining married to an unbeliever you were compromising your faith they somehow being pagan would contaminate your faith Paul responds to that in verse 14 in words that have often been misunderstood he uses Old Testament language let me give the background before we look at the verse in the Old Testament in order to offer a sacrifice or take part in the special feasts you had to be ritually clean some things that made you ritually unclean included for example having to deal with the corpse of somebody it's not a bad thing it's not a sinful thing it just means that you were forbidden from offering a sacrifice until the time had passed that you were ritually clean again we see an example of that when Jesus is on trial with

Pontius Pilate the Jews refused to go into Pilate's palace it was a pagan place and if they went in there they would be ritually unclean that would mean they couldn't take part in the Passover festival which was happening at the time so they stay outside the palace that's not in a sense that going in the palace is particularly sinful it just may mean that they were ritually unclean now you put a ritually clean person with somebody or something that is unclean the result is that the clean person becomes unclean it doesn't work the other way that is put an unclean and a clean together doesn't make both clean Paul is saying the opposite is true for the Christian married to the non-Christian probably some of the Corinthians were saying hey if you're married to a non-Christian then that will make you unclean it would contaminate your Christian faith Paul says no it doesn't work like that if you are a Christian and your husband or wife is a non-Christian they are regarded as in effect holy that is your own faith is not contaminated by them now in a sense this is a tricky argument and of course we're dealing with a particular situation in ancient Corinth but what he is offering here is great encouragement I think to those of you who are Christians married to people who are not Christians your faith is not compromised by your marriage be encouraged by that but on the other hand he is not saying that your husband or wife is not somehow saved by your faith no he actually says at the end of verse 16 wife for all you know you might save your husband and husband for all you know you might save your wife so clearly being holy is not being saved here the issue is about the validity of Christian faith when married to a non-Christian and

[25 : 07] Paul is saying you are valid in Christian faith even if your spouse is not a Christian same applies for the children as well at the end of verse 14 now a number of you are married to unbelievers and that's okay but seek their conversion pray for them be faithful witnesses to them don't think that your faith will mean their salvation it doesn't but your faith means that you're not contaminated through your marriage with them now even in my time over the last four years at Holy Trinity we've seen some great answers to prayer where non-believing husbands or wives have become Christians partly through the witness of their Christian spouse be encouraged be encouraged well these are difficult words they're words that often have been rejected or misunderstood over the centuries but there are principles here that

Christians still need to adhere to and obey the strength of the sex drive has led many Christian traditions in the past and present to renounce sexual activity is not good and only for the procreation of children but the Bible teaches us here amongst other places as well that sexual pleasure within marriage is God's good gift it is to be enjoyed and used but all good things can be abused any good thing lifted up too high becomes an idol and idolatry we are not to follow the cultural trends of our society anyone anywhere anyhow no limits which has made sexual activity an idol of our age Paul's words to the Corinthians were as counter-cultural then as they are now and there are people sometimes within the church who say that we should abandon this sexual teaching of the Bible because it's outdated and irrelevant it's obsolete our society has changed sexual taboos of the past are no longer taboo the Bible's irrelevant they say but they fail to see that

Paul's words then were just as difficult as they are today and where our culture changes and the pendulum swings in Victorian era it was at the opposite extreme from what it is now and maybe in a hundred years if we live long enough to see it it'll swing right the way back but God's decrees and God's standards abide for all time and in any age they will be counter-cultural either more permissive than a very abstaining ascetic society or maybe more restrictive than our own libertine society but sex is God's good gift for use within heterosexual marriage alone is expression of a faithful commitment on the part of two people modeling God's faithful commitment of us but one final word probably almost without fail we are all guilty of some sexual sin as we heard in the second reading if you lust after somebody in your heart you commit adultery I guess there would be few of us who are not guilty of something like that one Corinthians was written to a church that was in many serious errors theologically and ethically Paul's words in this letter over many issues are strong and his rebuke is severe but throughout there is a very powerful note of the grace of God to forgive those who repent of their sin when we repent and receive God's forgiveness the slate is wiped clean sexual sins are not too big for that slate to be wiped clean let me encourage you not to live in the shadow of past guilt but to repent to know God's forgiveness and to start afresh in the mercy and grace of God let's pray

God we thank you for your clear instructions about how we are to live for the freedom for married people to enjoy each other sexually we thank you for your own commitment to us expressed in terms of marriage and we thank you for your extraordinary faithfulness to us despite our faithlessness father forgive us our sins we pray help us to rely on your grace and the power of your spirit we pray this for Jesus sake Amen