

The Imperfect Church – 12
The Moral Church
1 Corinthians 7:1-11

Introduction

I have been preaching an average of 45 Sundays per year for the last 18 plus years. Pretty quickly into my preaching career, I discovered the numerous benefits of preaching through books of the Bible. Over the years, those series have gotten progressively longer, and the texts for each sermon have gotten progressively shorter. For example, I preached through 1 Corinthians several years ago in 9 weeks, covering sometimes three chapters at a time. Now we are taking 35 weeks, going at a much slower pace. This allows multiple things to happen:

- 1) We let the Bible speak for itself and set the agenda. There is no need for me to lamely attempt to creatively fashion some sermon that has a bunch of fun stories and personal anecdotes that I hope will help you. God gets to speak from Scripture, determining the content and direction of the sermons.
- 2) We get to drill much more deeply into a text of Scripture and dwell in the vastness of God's Word. Instead of merely scratching the surface of a text, we get to mine for the gold that never ends in the Bible.
- 3) We reinforce our belief in the inspiration of the Bible. We believe that the Bible comes to us from God (inspired), therefore it is without error (inerrant), always trustworthy (infallible), sufficient to communicate all God would have us to know (sufficiency), thus it proves to be our sole and ultimate authority.

2 Timothy 3:16-17 – ¹⁶ All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right. ¹⁷ God uses it to prepare and equip his people to do every good work.

Hebrews 4:12-13 – ¹² For the word of God is alive and powerful. It is sharper than the sharpest two-edged sword, cutting between soul and spirit, between joint and marrow. It exposes our innermost thoughts and desires. ¹³ Nothing in all creation is hidden from God. Everything is naked and exposed before his eyes, and he is the one to whom we are accountable.

- 4) We are forced to deal with texts that we would otherwise ignore or avoid. So instead of staying away from passages that make us uncomfortable or confused, we are forced to wrestle with every single word.

TS – That one is especially true as we approach 1 Corinthians chapter 7. The entire chapter is typically ignored for numerous reasons. It can get confusing in places. It seems to create more questions than answers. And its topic is uncomfortable to most, and convicting to some. Outside a few familiar verses, this chapter is largely unknown. God put this chapter in the Bible for a reason. He wants us to know it, and to follow it. It will take us three sermons to wade into the great depths of this chapter.

1 Corinthians 7:1-11 - Now regarding the questions you asked in your letter. Yes, it is good to abstain from sexual relations. ² But because there is so much sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife, and each woman should have her own husband.

³ The husband should fulfill his wife's sexual needs, and the wife should fulfill her husband's needs. ⁴ The wife gives authority over her body to her husband, and the husband gives authority over his body to his wife.

⁵ Do not deprive each other of sexual relations, unless you both agree to refrain from sexual intimacy for a limited time so you can give yourselves more completely to prayer. Afterward, you should come together again so that Satan won't be able to tempt you because of your lack of self-control. ⁶ I say this as a concession, not as a command. ⁷ But I wish everyone were single, just as I am. Yet each person has a special gift from God, of one kind or another.

⁸ So I say to those who aren't married and to widows—it's better to stay unmarried, just as I am. ⁹ But if they can't control themselves, they should go ahead and marry. It's better to marry than to burn with lust.

¹⁰ But for those who are married, I have a command that comes not from me, but from the Lord. A wife must not leave her husband. ¹¹ But if she does leave him, let her remain single or else be reconciled to him. And the husband must not leave his wife.

TS – before we dig into these verses, let's remind ourselves of some historical context we have already covered in previous weeks. Corinth is in Greece, and the Corinthians have absorbed, been steeped in, and blindly followed the philosophies of the day (what Paul calls "human wisdom" in this letter). Those who have become Christians are struggling to sever ties with the prevailing wisdom they have unwittingly made part of their lives. Paul is pleading with them to build their lives on the Gospel and the truths of Christian Scripture, instead of pagan wisdom.

Part of the wisdom of their day, taught by the Greek Stoic and Epicurean philosophers, is that the body is evil. One of their cultural proverbial sayings was "The body is a tomb." The Stoic philosopher Epictetus said, "I am a poor soul shackled to a corpse." The soul is what matters; it is what is important. This led to two polarized

lifestyles. The first is licentiousness (living with license, without law). This philosophy said that since the body is evil and does not matter, you are free to give into its desires and do whatever it wishes. You can imagine the consequences of that kind of living. The text we looked at last week (back half of chapter 6) addressed that anything-goes lifestyle.

The competing lifestyle was the polar opposite, known as asceticism. It taught that since the body is evil and did not matter, it was to be restrained at any cost. If the body is evil, then so is pleasure. Don't eat any good food that you'll enjoy. Don't have any fun. Live this Spartan lifestyle that is totally bland, colorless, lifeless. A major component of this kind of life was that it remained sexually pure. Not "pure" in the sense of honoring God, but "pure" meaning non-participatory. If the body is evil, and if pleasure is evil, then sex is evil. Living in total abstinence was how you honored the gods. Celibacy was conducive to gaining wisdom. In fact, all of the female priestesses of the pagan Greek gods had to be virgins. So if you wanted to be spiritual and connect with the gods, there was only one way to do that...without any form of sexual activity.

Now let's remind ourselves about the context of the Corinthian Church, in particular. This is a church that was divided into factions. Paul has already addressed that in the first three chapters. And it will come up again later in the letter. Groups are dividing over everything, into the different camps based on their different beliefs. In chapters 8-10 they have divided into camps over what kinds of food it is ok to eat. Here in chapters 5-7 we are likely dealing with another series of factions. There are those Christians who have apparently embraced total freedom of sexual expression (chapters 5-6).

Now we are dealing with the other side of that view. There is a faction of Christians in Corinth who have looked at the rampant sexual immorality around them (in their city and in their church) and have swung the pendulum to the other side. In an effort to not be licentious, they have become legalistic. We don't want to participate in any kind of sexual sin, so we will not participate in any kind of sexual activity. A noble endeavor, it may seem. But herein lies the problem...some of them are married.

Are those who are married, in the name of some form of spirituality, supposed to live celibate lives? What if one spouse wants to do that, but the other one doesn't? Is it ok to leave your spouse in the name of honoring God? These are logical, reasonable questions. And these are questions they are asking Paul to answer for them. V. 1a – **“Now regarding the questions you asked in your letter.”** All that follows here

in chapter 7 are answers to questions they are asking him. They want to know how to follow Jesus in their marriages, how to honor the Lord in their sexuality, and how singleness plays a role. These are answers we all need, either for ourselves, or to help those around us.

v. 1b – “Yes, it is good to abstain from sexual relations.” The phrase literally translates, “Yes, it is good for a man not to touch a woman.” This is likely another one of the Corinthian slogans from their culture. We were introduced to two of them in chapter 6: “I am allowed to do anything” and “Food was made for the stomach, and the stomach for food.” Both clearly slogans from the license side of things. This statement here in v. 1 is the slogan from the legalistic side. “It is good for a man not to touch a woman.” So these Christians have heard this slogan and how true it is for their culture’s pagan gods. Is it true for the one true God? And as an ironic sidenote: due to how the slogan is phrased in the original language, it is the men who are calling for this abstinence, not the women. So the popular image of the wife with a headache is not what is happening here.

Remember, these are relatively new Christians, at most been in the faith for 5 years. This is all new to them. How do you interpret the baptismal creed from Galatians 3:26-28 - ²⁶ For you are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus. ²⁷ And all who have been united with Christ in baptism have put on Christ, like putting on new clothes. ²⁸ There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus. Does this mean that, in Christ, we abandon what makes us male and female (sexuality)? Or what do we do with Jesus’ teaching in Luke 20 that there is no marriage in heaven? Or that we are supposed to pray for God’s kingdom to come to the earth, and for God’s will to be done on Earth, as it is in Heaven? Or what do we do with the fact that their spiritual father, the Apostle Paul, was single? They don’t have a Christian tradition to help them here. Their confusion is justified. Paul had to deal with this same issue in other places too.

1 Timothy 4:1-3 - Now the Holy Spirit tells us clearly that in the last times some will turn away from the true faith; they will follow deceptive spirits and teachings that come from demons. ² These people are hypocrites and liars, and their consciences are dead. ³ They will say it is wrong to be married and wrong to eat certain foods. But God created those foods to be eaten with thanks by faithful people who know the truth.

Colossians 2:20-23 - ²⁰ You have died with Christ, and he has set you free from the spiritual powers of this world. So why do you keep on following the rules of the world, such as, ²¹ “Don’t handle! Don’t taste! Don’t touch!”?

[same word as 1 Corinthians 7:1] ²² Such rules are mere human teachings about things that deteriorate as we use them. ²³ These rules may seem wise because they require strong devotion, pious self-denial, and severe bodily discipline. But they provide no help in conquering a person's evil desires.

So those who go to these extremes in some form of hyper-spirituality, are actually not helping themselves at all. Richard Hays writes, "Those who say "I am free to do anything" and those who say "I must abstain from everything" are equally setting themselves outside their God-given creaturely limitations. The attempt to escape our finitude—whether one way or the other—is bound to fail and send us crashing down."¹ It's like those who do some extreme diet...what happens it seems every time? They crash and end up gaining back all the weight, and then some.

Sadly, this issue has not gone away in our world. There are those people of faith who so villainize sexual activity that they view it as somehow beneath us. That spiritual maturity means we shouldn't have to lower ourselves for such things. Paul's counsel is clear: that's foolish. Look at the sinful world around you...you'll never survive. Holiness is not rejection pleasure. Holiness is enjoying God-given pleasure within God-given parameters.

Yes, Paul says, it is good to remain celibate. Yes, it is good to avoid sexual activity...in the right circumstance. But for those who are married (whom he is clearly addressing here) celibacy is not the God-honoring choice. V.2 – "But because there is so much sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife, and each woman should have her own husband." This verse is not a command for everyone to get married. This is not saying, "well, the culture is so rampant with sexual immorality, you single people need to get married." Though that may be true for some, it actually contradicts what Paul will say in v. 8, v. 27, and v. 38 about singleness. When he says each should "have" their own spouse, it has a sexual connotation to it, much like there is today with language like that. Here is what he is saying, "because there is so much sexual immorality around you, those of you who are married should have a healthy and helpful sexual relationship with your spouse (in contradiction to those in chapter 6 who were visiting prostitutes).

v. 3-6 - ³ The husband should fulfill his wife's sexual needs, and the wife should fulfill her husband's needs. ⁴ The wife gives authority over her body to her husband, and the husband gives authority over his body to his wife.

¹ Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1997), 118.

⁵ Do not deprive each other of sexual relations, unless you both agree to refrain from sexual intimacy for a limited time so you can give yourselves more completely to prayer. Afterward, you should come together again so that Satan won't be able to tempt you because of your lack of self-control. ⁶ I say this as a concession, not as a command.

Each spouse should "fulfill" the other's "sexual needs." The word for "fulfill" is a great word...*apodidomai*, literally 'pay back.' It is used by Jesus in Matthew 20:8 for paying workers what they are owed. It was used by the Good Samaritan who paid for the hotel for the injured traveler. He told the innkeeper to cover the tab if costs went over, and when he returned, he would *apodidomai* the innkeeper. That word for "sexual need" is the word for "obligation." For people like the Corinthians who are used to asserting their individual rights, this is a radical teaching. It makes a clear point that one of the joys and purposes of God-designed marriage is sexual fulfillment, for both husband and wife.

Not only is that clear, it was revolutionary for Paul's day. Notice the mutuality of the phrasing...wife should do this; husband should do this. Wife gives authority of her body to her husband, and the husband does the same. The individual wording in the original language is identical on both sides. The ancient world held to two purposes for sexuality: 1) procreation; 2) something the wife endures for her husband's sake. Though Paul (and the Bible) have been called misogynistic and chauvinistic, this proves the opposite. The mutuality to marriage and sexuality is not found anywhere in the ancient writings, outside the Bible.

In v. 5 when he says not to "deprive" each other, he uses a legal term that means "defraud, or steal." It is a callback to the first half of chapter 6 to those who were cheating the legal system for personal gain. Those who would withhold sex from a spouse are cheating the marriage system. That's not how God designed it to work.

However, if there are those who want to focus on some other form of spirituality, since that was driving their celibacy, he tells them a good solution. He offers a concession, not a command. Meaning, this is optional. And it is only for those who agree to it. That phrase "both agree" is the Greek word *symphony*. So if one part of this two-part symphony is not in tune with this option, it's not an option.

Call a time-out for the purpose of more focused prayer. Sure, that's a good thing...but it must be temporary. Short-term. Then come back together again. Why? Because the last thing you should ever force your spouse to

endure is to send them out into the world sexually frustrated and unfulfilled. That's just dangerous. Satan is ready and waiting to tempt you and your spouse into unfaithfulness. That is not to say that if your spouse had an affair that you are to blame, nor to say you even contributed to it. But it is to say that this scenario is a possibility.

v. 7-9 - ⁷ But I wish everyone were single, just as I am. Yet each person has a special gift from God, of one kind or another. ⁸ So I say to those who aren't married and to widows—it's better to stay unmarried, just as I am. ⁹ But if they can't control themselves, they should go ahead and marry. It's better to marry than to burn with lust.

Paul's marital status has been much debated by scholars over the years. Paul most definitely would have been previously married. He was a Jewish man, a rabbi, a Pharisee, and likely a member of the Sanhedrin (Jewish ruling leaders). One could not be a rabbi, a Pharisee, or on the Sanhedrin, without being married. Jewish tradition found it sinful to remain unmarried past age 20. Paul was definitely married, but now does not have a spouse. Two options: 1) his wife died at some point previously. 2) when Paul converted to Christianity, his unbelieving wife left him (this option is preferable, especially when you read further into chapter 7). He will get into the blessings and reasons for his preference for singleness later in the chapter, but he clearly declares it better. Better in what way? It enables a more focused attention on gospel work in the world. That is Paul's reality as he travels around...something he would be unable to do with a wife and children.

Yet each person, he says, has different gifts. Singleness is a gift. So is marriage. If you have a desire to get married, and a desire for sexual expression, marriage is the gift God gives. If you have no interest in either, that is a gift from the Lord that he wants to use for his purposes in the world. He provides three different avenues of life: 1) Best – single and unpressured (externally or internally) to marry...can be used mightily of God in unique ways. 2) Good – desire for marriage and sexual expression, gets married and lives faithfully in that scenario. 3) Bad – has sexual desires, but expresses them outside the bounds of marriage.

v. 10-11 - ¹⁰ But for those who are married, I have a command that comes not from me, but from the Lord. A wife must not leave her husband. ¹¹ But if she does leave him, let her remain single or else be reconciled to him. And the husband must not leave his wife.

Again, for those who were in pursuit of this hyper-spirituality, could perhaps abandon their spouse in the name of religious devotion. This text clearly condemns that action. This command, Paul, says, is from the Lord. Meaning, he is referring back to a clear teaching of Jesus. This is one of the few places Paul will do this, likely a reference to Mark 10, since Mark was the only Gospel that had been written when Paul wrote this letter.

He uses two different words for "leave" for the wife and the husband. Though they are two different words, the result is the same...the marriage ends. His point is this: do not initiate divorce in the name of religious devotion. If you are already married, your marriage is part of your religious devotion. God can and will use it for your good and his glory. The wife must not leave (word means separate...not in our contemporary sense of legal separation, but as in abandonment). The husband must not leave his wife. The word Paul uses for leave in reference to the husband is an interesting word: *aphiemi* that literally translates "send away." Husbands, don't push her away, don't distance yourself from her. Don't leave her physically, emotionally, or sexually.

Conclusion

This is challenging, tough stuff from the Bible. For those of you who have had to deal with the reality of divorce and remarriage, texts like this bring up a lot of bad memories. For those of you who were abandoned by a spouse, this is hard to hear. For those who are causing, or enduring, unfulfilling marriages, this is convicting. But for all of us, this should be liberating. It frees us from trying to navigate marriage, singleness, and sexuality on our own. God gives us loving guidance to help us. And more help will come as we dive further into this chapter in the coming weeks.

Let's revisit that word for "leave." Again, it translates as "send away." It is used for forgiveness in multiple places. Jesus uses it in Matthew 18 to refer to "forgiving the debt" of sinners. He sends it away. It is used in Acts 2:38 for those who repent and are baptized in Jesus' name, they are forgiven. Their sins are sent away. I remember this word vividly from my undergrad Greek class. The girl who sat next to me was named Amy. I remember talking about this in class...for Amy to be forgiven, Jesus would take the sins *aphiemi* and send them away.

Believe/Repent/Confess/Baptize
Communion