

# THE STORY OF MARRIAGE

SERIES: UNDER THE CROSS



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1 Corinthians 7:1-16  
Ninth Message  
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*1 Corinthians 7:1-16*

I want to show you a video and then ask what you saw. [video]

What did you see?

This video is from an experiment first performed in 1944 by a pair of researchers named Fritz Heider and Marianne Simmel. They showed this video to many people and asked them what they saw. Almost everyone who responded interpreted these moving shapes according to some story that they made up.

The circle and triangles became characters. The box became a safe place. Emotions were ascribed: the triangle was angry and violent; the circle was scared and frantic. There was plot, tension, conflict, and surprise.

This experiment has been repeated thousands of times since. The clear conclusion is that we seem innately designed to understand everything in this world as a story.

We are story makers, storytellers, and story consumers. Everything that happens is a story. My whole life is a series of stories. Nothing just happens. Everything is a story.

This morning, we are continuing our series in 1 Corinthians. We arrive at chapter 7, where the apostle Paul starts to deal with the specific topic of marriage. Remember that Paul had received a letter from the church in Corinth. It shouldn't surprise us that one of the main topics they asked about was sex.

Our stories in this world are never monologues. They always involve other people. They often—but not always—involve one particular person in a unique relationship of intimacy. As Paul addresses the topic of marriage, he talks about what happens when a man and a woman come together for that kind of intimate relationship.

This is important because marriage is one way that God writes a story with another person in our lives. It's not the only way, and for many people, it isn't part of their story—which is fine because life is about a broader story of intimacy, relationship, love, and vulnerability. Marriage is just one of the ways God teaches us about those things, but it is a particularly powerful way.

As God reveals himself in Scripture, much of what he says has direct relevance to marriage and sexuality. In this passage, the apostle Paul addresses four very specific situations that were happening in Corinth. As we see what he says about them, we'll find a lot of overlap with the situations we face.

He speaks to four different categories: people who are married, those who have lost a spouse to death, marriages which are struggling, and Christians who are married to unbelievers. He gives very specific advice to each of these categories. And his advice can be helpful to us as well, especially if we find ourselves in those categories.

Overall, his message is simple: Do the hard work of writing your story with your spouse. Don't allow your stories to diverge. Keep them together. If you're not married, you can stay that way or choose a spouse to join stories with—either is okay. His general advice is not to expect changing your circumstances to be a solution, but if you want to change, go ahead.

His advice is helpful. But we always have to remember that this book isn't a collection of advice or even guidelines for living. It's a revelation of the person of God. We find God through these words. Paul is not a sex therapist, and he is not a marriage counselor. God is revealing himself to his creation. Let's understand the advice, but as always, let's look to encounter the mystery of God himself in these words.

## **Sex in marriage**

The apostle begins this chapter by addressing those who are currently married but are not prioritizing sexual intimacy in their relationship. Most commentators

speculate that there was a faction within the church that was advocating a kind of super-spiritual marriage that abstained from sexual intimacy. We aren't certain of the situation, but we do know that Paul strongly advocates regular sexual intimacy in marriage.

### 1 Corinthians 7:1-7:

**Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman."<sup>2</sup> But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband.<sup>3</sup> The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.<sup>6</sup> Now as a concession, not a command, I say this.<sup>7</sup> I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another.**

The apostle is masterful here. He finds a balance between a set of complicated issues. It seems as if the church in Corinth had slogans that they found helpful. Paul begins by quoting one of them, literally, "It is good for a man not to touch a woman." And he affirms their slogan while saying it is a bit too simplistic.

Yes, there are definitely cases where it is good for a man not to touch a woman. He closes this section by saying he has found incredible contentment in being celibate and single. There are cases where this is true. But being married is not one of them.

His main point is abundantly clear here: if you're married, you should be having sex regularly.

It's not that complicated. I do a lot of counseling for people trying to figure out how following Jesus affects their day-to-day lives. Sex is often a part of that. So often, I talk to couples who are not married but sexually active. I tell them that following Jesus obediently means not being sexually active if you aren't married. And then I talk to couples who are married but aren't having sex regularly. And I tell them that following Jesus obediently

means being sexually active if you are married.

The actual advice Paul gives is clear and simple. But behind the advice is an incredible theology of why this is the case.

The remarkable thing about all the discussion around marriage is the repeated emphasis on mutuality. At least 12 times, the apostle Paul gives the exact same instructions to husbands and wives. Nowhere in ancient literature is there a picture of marriage quite like this. And we have to ask why. Paul could have easily said, "spouses do this for each other." But he specifically calls out time and time again that wives should do this for their husbands and husbands should do the exact same thing for their wives.

Every commentator I read observed that you can't read this passage without being hit over the head with the theme of mutuality.

This theme would have been particularly remarkable in a first-century culture. Paul is clever in the way he unpacks this. I don't love fishing, but I figured I would use a fishing analogy here.

It's like Paul sets a lure and drops it in the water. The first part of his phrase is something they can readily embrace. The lure looks like a delicious fly that the fish wants to eat. The hook is carefully camouflaged so it can't be detected.

The most dramatic example of this is in verse 4. First, the apostle says, "the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does." That's the lure. Everyone in the first century would immediately agree with this statement. The reader is drawn in and takes the bait. It was a legal reality. The wife literally belonged to her husband. When this letter was being read aloud in the church, and the reader came to that phrase, every head would nod.

But when the next phrase was read, most heads would have stopped mid-nod. That's the hook that was hidden by the lure. They've been caught by the lure, and now they can't back out. Because the next phrase was radically counter-cultural: "likewise, the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does."

That phrase would have been borderline illegal in the first century. How could the wife have authority over the husband's body? No one in the first century talked like this. It's the only place in the New Testament where

the word authority is used in an explicit reference to marriage. It is a mutual authority: each is given authority over the other's body.

This text is partly why I believe that the New Testament doesn't establish any kind of authority hierarchy within marriage. It's hard to reconcile one partner having authority when both are given authority over each other here. The husband is not in charge of his wife. There is no difference in leadership. Each leads in unique ways.

It is true that other passages in the New Testament involve different instructions given for how husbands and wives ought to treat each other because men and women are different. But those are describing how to treat each other in relationship— not who is the leader. In my reading of the New Testament, I see marriage presented as two partners, each giving themselves up for the other. There is no authority structure within marriage

But again, what's most important is the theology behind this.

In marriage, you are writing your story as an entwined story with another person. You are sharing a life together. In the words of Genesis, you are becoming one. Here is a description of the story you are writing.

#### **Genesis 2:25:**

**And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.**

The story of marriage is a story of vulnerability, intimacy, and deep connection. It is a story of mutual love. It's a story of learning to love another person and be loved in return. To be trusted with authority over another person's body and to give authority over your own body to another person; there is nothing more vulnerable than that.

That's why sexual intimacy is important. You can share a house, you can raise kids together, you can plan meals, vacation, and have family movie nights. None of those things require vulnerability and risk and intimacy and mutual authority like the act of having sex. But if you are regularly sexually intimate, you have to address the miscommunication, the hurt feelings, and the constant challenge of loving and being loved.

Now, Paul is also aware that many of the people hearing this letter are not married. Not being married

does not mean you cannot learn the lessons of intimacy and love. It doesn't mean you miss out on an aspect of the fullness of life. So, he addresses them to assure them of that fact.

## **Widows and widowers**

In this next section, the apostle addresses what sounds like two categories of people at first but which is probably one. The word translated as "unmarried" here is most likely a reference to widowers, as the NIV lists it in a footnote. There is no commonly used Greek word for widower and the parallel suggests that this is what Paul refers to. Paul will address those who have never been married at the end of the chapter.

### **1 Corinthians 7:8-9:**

**To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single, as I am.<sup>9</sup> But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion.**

The essence of Paul's command is consistent throughout this entire chapter. He generally shows a bias for those who aren't married to stay that way. He admits this is because he has found great contentment in such a decision. But in every case, he gives permission to pursue a spouse and get married.

I think he is trying to help people avoid the trap of thinking that changing your circumstance will solve your problems. This is always a temptation in lots of different situations. We think that a better job, a nicer house, getting married, a new car, or any other change in our external circumstances will somehow scratch the itch we're feeling.

Paul warns us against that. In particular, he says very clearly here that getting married won't fix anything.

But in the same breath, he says that if you want to get married, go ahead. Even though changing your circumstances won't solve your problems, sometimes you should get a different job, buy a new house, get married or buy a car. It won't solve your problem, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't do it.

Remember that the goal here is to encounter Christ, not to solve your problems. You can encounter Christ in one way by remaining as you are. That's why Paul says that "it is good for them remain single"—you can experience the goodness of a full life with Christ apart

from being married. But you can encounter Christ in another way by getting married. So, if you want to get married, go ahead.

Sometimes, these kinds of instructions frustrate us. We want God to tell us what to do. Give us a clear path and we can just follow instructions. But often he gives us freedom.

In college, I was thinking about dating this amazing young woman I'd known since high school. We talked a lot, and I was very interested in her. But I wanted to find God's will. I remember asking the college pastor here at PBC what I should do. I didn't expect his answer.

He said, "What do you want to do?"

That's not what I expected. I thought I was trying to figure out what God wanted for me. I told him that I wanted to date her. He said that's my answer. So I dated her. I married her. I raised five kids with her. And in a month, we'll celebrate 25 years of marriage. I think I found God's will.

In the specific case of widowers and widows, Paul gives freedom to follow God in staying single or getting married. But, in the next category, he has a different approach.

## Struggling marriages

We've seen the apostle address two demographics so far. Now he wants to address those people who are married but wish they were single. They are in a struggling marriage and want to get out of it. Once again, thinking that changing their circumstances will solve their problems.

### 1 Corinthians 7:10-11:

**To the married I give this charge (not I, but the LORD): the wife should not separate from her husband <sup>11</sup> (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife.**

The most confusing part of this passage is the parenthetical phrase "not I, but the LORD." It's even more confusing because in the next passage, he says the opposite, "not the LORD, but I." But it really isn't that confusing because all the apostle is saying is that in the case of divorce, Jesus directly addressed the situation,

so he is quoting Jesus himself. That's why he says here "not I, but the LORD."

In the next section, there is no direct quote from Jesus, but that doesn't make Paul's words any less authoritative because he is writing the words of Scripture by the Spirit. That's why, at the end of the chapter, he adds ironically, "And I think I have the Spirit too."

What Paul is saying here is simply to stay married. Do all that is in your power to stay with your spouse. Divorce is always a tragedy—everyone knows that. No one gets married, hoping it will last five years or so and then end in divorce. There are situations where divorce is the better tragedy among all the options. But the goal is always to keep writing your stories together.

If you are struggling in your marriage, do all you can to write your story together.

When I was in seminary, my wife and I had a very challenging season in our marriage. We had more conflict than peace, and we didn't know what to do. Eventually, God led us to a marriage counselor, and we stayed in counseling for almost two years. That took a lot of time, a lot of money, and a lot of emotional energy.

But we figured that this was the best possible way to spend time, money, and energy. We asked what would set us up the best for the rest of life? What would set up our children to be well adjusted? What better way could we spend any amount of money than on the health of our marriage?

That investment has served us well. We have faced so many challenges together—things that were much harder than anything we faced in that season. Without that foundation, I don't think we would have been able to keep writing our stories together.

Many of you know that my wife, Rachel, is a pastor at a different church. Sometimes, people think that means that we are writing different stories now. But we don't see it that way. We sense that God has simply broadened the scope of our story. We've both always been passionate about God's larger kingdom in the Bay Area. We are not just following Jesus at PBC; we are part of something bigger.

So now God has called us to serve him in the Bay Area in the larger community of the capital "C" church. And that is an incredible gift. There were some challenges along the way. But we have consistently found that when

we work through the temptations to write our own story and do the hard work to find unity and intimacy, we are surprised at the good things God has for us on the other side.

If marriage is tough—and it's always tough—do the hard work to stay together. Write your stories together.

## Married to unbeliever

The apostle has addressed married people who aren't sexually active, those who have lost their spouses, and struggling marriages. At the end of our section, he addresses followers of Jesus who are married to non-Christians. It's a different topic, but he gives the same general advice.

### 1 Corinthians 7:12-16:

**To the rest I say (I, not the LORD) that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. <sup>13</sup> If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. <sup>14</sup> For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. <sup>15</sup> But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace. <sup>16</sup> For how do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?**

Once again, when he says, "I, not the Lord," he only points out that Jesus didn't directly address this situation. But that doesn't make his instructions any less authoritative.

His overall advice is consistent. If you follow Jesus and you're married to someone who doesn't, stay married. Continuing the theme of mutuality, he says the same thing to husbands and wives. He points out that as a follower of Jesus, you can have a redemptive influence on your spouse and your children. He's not saying you will save them but that you can be a witness of Christ to them.

But again, he also encourages giving the other person freedom. If they want to separate, "let it be so." I love that phrase, "God has called you to peace." That's so helpful!

If you are married to someone who doesn't know Jesus, stay with them but give them freedom. That's the balance to find. But balance is hard. There is always a temptation to swing one way or the other. You want to either force them into faith or push them away. But the apostle's advice is to stay calm. The apostle Paul asks, "How do you know what will happen?" Your job is not to control the future but to be faithful in the present.

Remember one more time: this isn't about having the perfect marriage or fixing all our problems. It's about encountering Christ. Sometimes, walking in ambiguity is the best way to encounter Christ. Those situations force us into active daily dependence on the love of the Father, intimacy with Christ, and the presence of the Spirit. When things are unclear, we need God in deep ways.

And in every case, Christ is sufficient. God can meet you there. Hang in there. God is good.

## Conclusion

The apostle has dealt with a wide variety of issues here. And doesn't that make sense? When we're talking about sex and marriage and singleness and divorce, there's simply no one situation. Everyone's life is unique.

But amid the complexity, we do see a common thread. Write the story of marriage together with your partner, but the bigger story is the one that God is writing. You don't need to be married. You don't need to change your circumstances. Your story can involve intimacy, fulfillment, excitement, and relationships in many different ways.

Over and above everything, find Christ in your marriage. Find him in the joys. Find him in the pains. Find him in the temptation. Find him in your contentment.

Christ is sufficient for you. Christ is sufficient for you. Christ is sufficient for you.