

The Marriage Mystery

Intimacy

1 Corinthians 7:1-5

Mark Vroegop

“Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: “It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.” But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. 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. 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” (1 Cor. 7:1–5 ESV).

This is our third week talking about the marriage mystery. In week one, I tried to establish the foundation of marriage between a man and a woman as part of God’s design to reveal his glory. In week two we talked about the role of a husband and wife through the lens of the gospel, love, and submission.

I tried to establish that each of those words applies to every Christian, no matter if you are married or single. But I also tried to help you understand that the gospel, love, and submission are uniquely applied in marriage.

Today, we are going to talk about sexual intimacy. And I’m curious how many of you have heard a sermon on a Sunday morning that addresses this topic. To be honest, I can’t remember a sermon on the subject of sex through my years in middle school, high school, and college. It wasn’t until pre-marital counseling that I received biblical teaching on sexuality. In fact, I remember being internally outraged when I learned that the reference to your body being the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19) was actually talking about sexuality. Most of my life I only heard that passage cited when the church talked about “more important” things—like smoking and drinking.

Goal: A Biblical and Beautiful Vision for Sex

My goal in this sermon is to lay out the beautiful and biblical vision for sex in the context of marriage. I hope to show you from the Bible the mysterious and powerful union that is a vital aspect of marriage. I want to redeem sexuality from the ash-heap of our culture. I’m praying that you see the beautiful picture that God wanted to paint by creating sexuality. And I also want to apply some grace to the painful or regrettable mistakes of the past.

I'm glad you came to church today. I want to be faithful to the Scriptures, and I want to be sensitive to the wide array of people and ages that we have listening. Parents, I'm going to work hard to not put you in a too-awkward position with your younger kids. I don't think they'll hear anything more than what most of them hear at school or on TV. But even if that does happen, I think it's commendable that the first place the conversation started about sexuality is the church.

Two Kinds of Intimacy

Our Scripture reading today is 1 Corinthians 7:1-5. It identifies a biblical view of sexual intimacy. The passage was Paul's response to some issues he knew were happening in the Corinthian church and to some questions he received. Paul's words are designed to correct a wrong understanding of intimacy.

What's fascinating and encouraging about this passage is its relevance for our present culture. Since the beginning of time, there have been two divergent views regarding sexual intimacy. There is a false intimacy that is generally reflected in the culture, and there is a true intimacy reflected in the Bible. Paul writes to address both issues.

Regardless of your age, your marital status, or your spiritual maturity, what we are about to discuss is really important. Let's start with false intimacy.

False Intimacy

In order to understand the false intimacy narrative and behavior that Paul is addressing positively in chapter seven, we need to go back to chapter six. In 6:13-17 we discover an intriguing and blunt passage:

“Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food”—and God will destroy both one and the other. The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. And God raised the Lord and will also raise us up by his power. Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! Or do you not know that he who is joined to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For, as it is written, ‘The two will become one flesh.’ But he who is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him” (1 Cor. 6:13–17).

This letter addresses a number of issues besides sexuality. If you read the entire letter, you would get a clear sense that a major problem for the church in Corinth is the manner in which the culture of the city was influencing the culture of the church. The church was marked by needless divisions (1:10-17), an over-emphasis on gifts (1:20-31), toleration of clear sexual sin (5:1-6), and lawsuits among believers (6:1-11). Their perspective on sexuality was a symptom of a bigger issue—namely that they were taking their ethical cues from the world and not from God.

As it relates to their view of sexuality, some people were treating sex as if it didn't matter. Others treated sex like it was dirty.

The city of Corinth was a thriving metropolitan city. It had commerce, diversity, crime, poverty, socio-economic issues, and a culture of immorality. It was no different than any large city in the United States today, even Indianapolis. Yes, “Naptown” can be naughty. In particular, there was a culture of immorality within the larger culture in Corinth.

The city of Corinth was renowned for its pagan worship, including the temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of love and beauty. Prostitution was a part of the worship and was rampant in the culture of Corinth. Athenaeus, a Greek rhetorician from the second century said, “We keep mistresses for pleasure, concubines for daily concubinage, but wives in order to produce children legitimately and to have a trustworthy guardian of our domestic property.”¹

The morality of sexual intimacy was downplayed. To counter this, Paul does two things: (1) he points back to Genesis, referring to the sacredness of the “one flesh union” (v. 16), and (2) he connects the oneness of Christians to Christ, making sexual activity an extension of their lifestyle worship. We’ll explore this more in a minute. The default sexual ethic of human beings is to decouple sex from morality.

Sex, in this view, is considered merely as a human desire.² It is an appetite that should—even must—be fulfilled. Religious or moral restrictions on sexual activity are seen as backward, unnecessary, and even repressive. A teenager or adult committed to sexual chastity is often considered strange or prudish. The problem, however, is that this view of sexuality objectifies people. It creates a transactional relationship based upon using another person merely to meet your own desire.

This false intimacy is behind every form of sexual immorality, including pornography. There’s nothing covenantal, nothing other-centered, and nothing related to giving. It’s false intimacy. Immorality may feel thrilling, risky, and deeply attractive, but it’s an illusion.

The other view of sex in our culture is to consider it as a critical form of self-expression. This takes the sex-as-appetite perspective and makes it more philosophical, even heroic. True intimacy is discovered through finding yourself or “being yourself.” Sexuality is reduced not to an appetite but to the whims of the individual. It is primarily for your own fulfillment and self-realization however you pursue it. And the heroes of today are those who don’t let anyone or any religious system hold them back.

The tragedy, as I shared in the first message, is that if you pursue sexuality or marriage through this lens, you will never find true fulfillment, because God did not design marriage or sexuality to be the answer to your self-fulfillment needs.

¹ Thomas R. Schreiner, [*1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*](#), ed. Eckhard J. Schnabel, vol. 7, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 2018), 128.

² I’m very grateful to Tim and Kathy Keller’s book *The Meaning of Marriage*. Chapter 8 was the basis for much of the material in the paragraphs that follow.

The problem in Corinth, and the problem in our own culture, is treating sexuality as if it doesn't really matter. That's why Paul talks about "one flesh" (6:16), a Christian's union with Christ (6:15), and the serious nature of immorality (6:17-18).

There's a third wrong view. It views sexuality as part of the base nature of humanity. It treats sex as dirty. And this perspective was also a part of the Corinthian culture. Some were over-spiritualizing celibacy. Some were bringing that into the confines of marriage. That's why Paul wrote chapter seven.

This perspective can make its way into many marriages as sexuality is filled with tension, emotional pain, and disappointment. Perhaps sex isn't viewed as dirty, but it's so loaded, it's better just to be avoided. This is a trap of false intimacy—a oneness that doesn't exist in the way it could.

False intimacy uses or avoids sex for reasons that not only do not fit with God's plan, but they actually become personally destructive. So, what should we do?

First, we should carefully examine the source of our understanding, perspective, and attitudes about sexuality. Every human being will learn a value-set for sexuality somewhere. You might consider asking yourself, "What has been my source for how I view sexuality?" Second, we should be encouraged that every culture throughout the history of mankind has faced substantial issues related to sexuality. We ought not throw up our hands or give in because our culture is filled with sexual brokenness. Third, this text offers hope in a deeply personal area that can be filled with lots of pain, regret, shame, and frustration.

Let's look next at God's vision for true intimacy.

True Intimacy

The biblical view of sexuality involves the selfless, physical union of a man and a woman in the context of the covenant of marriage.

In chapter seven, Paul addresses what appears to be the Corinthian's statement about the goodness of a man not having sexual relations with a woman. That's why there are quotation marks in most translations. It likely means that some were reacting to the decadent culture by conversely making a strong commitment to sexual purity. Paul commends this.

So, for all the talk about sexuality in marriage, we have to remember that part of the vision is to help unmarried people live out this commitment. Marriage is hard. But so is sexual purity in a culture like Corinth and like ours. So, let's be sure that we keep working on creating community so single adults can win this battle.

Paul, however, is concerned that this "purity push" will go too far. Therefore, he identifies the importance of marriage and sexual expression in marriage. Let me highlight three key ideas:

Exclusive

In verse two, Paul lists marriage between a man and a woman as the only biblically-sanctioned context for sexual relations. “Every man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband.” All other expressions with other people, with the same gender, and with yourself are outside of God’s plan.

Remember in Genesis 2:24 when it said that a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife and they become one flesh? That’s covenantal language. And that text, along with this one, places a boundary around sexuality that must include a man and a woman in covenantal marriage. Why is this important?

“The Bible says don’t unite with someone physically unless you are willing to unite with the person emotionally, personally, socially, economically, and legally. Don’t become physically naked and vulnerable with another person without becoming vulnerable in every way because you have given up your freedom and bound yourself in marriage. . . Sex is God’s appointed way for two people to reciprocally say to one another, ‘I belong completely, permanently, and exclusively to you.’”³

Without the marriage covenant, sex is dangerous. It creates emotions that are ahead of commitments. It images something that is only true about covenant marriage. That’s why Paul reacted so negatively in chapter six about sexual relations with a prostitute. Sex makes us feel deeply connected to another person, even when used sinfully.⁴ You end up “feeling” married and even acting married when there has been no commitment made. You can become more committed than you should and end up staying in a bad relationship.

Sex is powerful. God designed it that way. And that’s why an exclusive marriage covenant is so necessary.

Selfless

The next thing that Paul says would have been culturally shocking. In verses 3-4, he identifies the mutual respect, love, and generosity that is to characterize sexual relations in marriage. The culture to which Paul is writing did not treat women as sexual equals with men, so to say that both men and women should be concerned about the sexual rights of their spouse is shocking! The wording is quite direct.

In the context of marriage, a husband and wife have an obligation to meet one another’s intimacy needs. Paul uses a strong word—*authority*—to describe the God-ordained nature of that commitment. Paul didn’t want a spouse opting out of sex because they had “given themselves to God.”⁵ Married couples have an obligation to practice selfless love in every area, but especially in sexuality. The other person’s sexual fulfillment is the focus.

³ Timothy and Kathy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage: Facing the Complexities of Commitment with the Wisdom of God*, (New York: Penguin, 2011), 256.

⁴ Timothy and Kathy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 259.

⁵ Thomas R. Schreiner, [*1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*](#), ed. Eckhard J. Schnabel, vol. 7, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 2018), 136.

True intimacy is not in receiving but in giving. Last week I said that marriage is like a dance. The goal is for there to be such mutual concern for one another that the sexual oneness is simply the most vivid expression of oneness in all other areas. Sex both reflects oneness and rekindles oneness.

A husband and a wife have a “selfless duty” to one another. Now, some of you are privately struggling because you believe that if you have sex out of a sense of duty, it would be inauthentic or meaningless. While sexual intimacy certainly can and should involve passion, if you wait until both are equally passionate, sexual intimacy can become less and less frequent, which in turn, creates less and less passion. It’s a vicious cycle.

“Sex is perhaps the most powerful God-created way to help you give your entire self to another human being. Sex is God’s appointed way for two people to reciprocally say to one another, ‘I belong completely, permanently, and exclusively to you.’ You must not use sex to say anything else.”⁶

The lure of illicit sex is the risk, the excitement of conquering or of being pursued, and the desire to impress. But have you ever wondered why people float from marriage to marriage, partner to partner? Because they never learn that true intimacy is when your spouse knows you and still makes love to you.

That’s why the marriage covenant is so critical. Sex reflects its selfless commitment.

Important

Paul warns the Corinthian believers in verse five about the dangers of depriving one another sexually. He identifies clear guidelines about seasons of fasting from sexuality. Paul is concerned that the absence of regular intimacy will open husbands and wives up to needless and strong temptation.

You see, there is something life-giving about sexual intimacy in the context of a marriage covenant. You need to see it as a covenant renewal. It is a way to remember, rehearse, and reinforce the mysterious union between a husband and a wife.

Through the various seasons of life, intimacy changes. But let me encourage married couples. Keep working on your marriage. Make your marriage a priority. Make exclusive, selfless intimacy an important part of your marriage.

Do you see the beautiful and biblical view of sexuality? It’s a marvelous gift that God designed to reveal something about himself.

So, if you are single, I hope this was a helpful vision of what God intends for sexuality to be. I’m glad you came today, even though it was mostly about marriage. And my charge to you is to keep fighting for sexual purity in a very hostile world. Church, my charge to you is to be sure that our single adults know that we are walking with them. We want our church to be a place where singles thrive.

If you are a parent, please help your children understand a biblical view of sexuality. You can’t afford to be on the sidelines on this one. Your kids are going to learn about sex somewhere and from someone. I

⁶ Timothy and Kathy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 257.

hope it's from you. Be proactive. Be open. Disciple your kids in every area, but especially in this one. A few years ago, one of our elders told me something profound about parenting: "Be nervous about what's not on the table, not what's on the table."

If you are married, take one step in making your marriage and even your intimacy better. Talk about this message. Get a grip on your calendar. Seek one another's forgiveness for selfishness. Become a loving, other-centered spouse in all areas, but especially in regards to sexuality.

If you feel guilty today because you've messed up, I'm calling you to apply the gospel to your life. Jesus died for every sin, including sexual sin. He loved you enough that he was willing to die for you. Come to him. Let him cleanse you. Start again and find some people to walk alongside you.

Whether you are married or single, God intends sexuality to make a powerful statement about the triune Godhead being the union that points to Jesus's love for the church.

It's a mystery. And it's amazing.

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