

Sermon: Whose Body?

Series: Singleness, Marriage, & Sex, 1 Corinthians, part 2 (1)

Bible Passage: 1 Corinthians 7:1-5

As we open the Word of God today, I just want to give the rating notice. This sermon is rated PG-11. If you're a 6th, 7th, or 8th grader, I don't think I've ever heard a sermon on this when I was your age. 1 Corinthians is a rated PG to rated NC-15 book. There are a lot of topics in here. Parents, prepare to resist the urge to cover their ears. I will do my best to not shock young people, and old people for that matter.

We're in a series in 1 Corinthians and today we're in chapter 7. 1 Corinthians is one of the longest books; in fact, it is the second longest epistles of the New Testament. In light of that, one of the ways to helpfully break down this epistle is this: I don't want us to think "we're doing a series in 1 Corinthians" that's too abstract and I don't think the apostle Paul thought that. What I'd like us to think instead is that we are now in the part of the Bible that talks about singleness, marriage, and sex.

As we look at that and come to this chapter, I realize that this is a potentially uncomfortable thing for parents. Even more so, when the kids start have the conversation about the birds and the bees, usually the parents are more nervous than even the kids. When the parents get around to the birds and the bees with their kids, it's usually too late because either the kids watched a video about it in health class or heard about it at a sleepover.

Part of this issue is to talk about the topic that the Bible has brought us to. We're going through the entire book of 1 Corinthians and this chapter is about singleness, marriage, and, this morning, sex. Let's read 1 Corinthians 7:1-7:

⁷ Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman." ² But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. ³ The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. ⁴ 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. ⁵ 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.

⁶ Now as a concession, not a command, I say this. ⁷ 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.

Please pray with me.

Heavenly Father, teach us from your Word. Teach us because if the Bible is truly from You and You are the Creator and if You are a loving and all-knowing Creator, then this is for our good. Not just for our good, but perhaps this is a rare breath of fresh air of truth from your Word to a world where the topic of sexuality has gone in so many directions. Lord, give us wisdom, give us discernment. What does the gospel of Jesus Christ say about the purposes for which you have given us this idea and gift of sex? We pray in Jesus name. Amen.

The three principles from this morning's passage that I want to share with you from the passage are:

1. The importance of marriage and sex as a topic
2. A fundamental principle of sex for marriage
3. An application of this principle

1. The importance of marriage and sex as a topic

I want us to step back and see that we're not just talking about sex. We're in a letter. When we're talking about sex here, I just want us to understand that some of us might not have a clear understanding of sex. There are two deficiencies: one is a mechanical one, that is, we are so young and we haven't seen porn or had it ourselves and we just don't really know what sex is about. The other deficiency is a theological and spiritual deficiency in our understanding of sex. The equivalent is knowing how to turn on a computer and for it to turn on, but being clueless if it somehow doesn't work. We know how to drive a car, but we don't really know how it works. For most of life, we don't really need to know how things work. However, when we talk about how sex works, we don't mean how it mechanically works (like lego pieces), but the importance of what God has done.

When we step back, we need to understand that Paul is writing a letter to the Corinthians. He's not just telling them a bunch of topics he thinks is important. He has actually asked them what he thinks about a very common quote in their day. They are essentially saying, "Paul, we're trying to live for Jesus in the Roman Empire, the modern era, and we have a question! We have heard that it is not good for a man to touch a woman." To touch a woman means to have sex. We see the Corinthians have written some letter to Paul and he is responding to them regarding their question about sex. Let's take a look beginning in verse 1:

7 Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: “It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.”

Most commentaries just skip that part but this is crucial. The importance of sex as a topic is this: we must not be afraid or silent as a church to address topics that the Bible speaks so plainly about. We must not consider it taboo or awkward or uncomfortable. We must not consider avoidable topics that the Bible speaks so clearly about. This is a standard email to a pastor. This is normal. We need to understand this. In our day and age, there is little talking about sex in the church.

In the church, there are two extremes. As a preacher, there is definitely a season where you're uncomfortable talking about sex. There is definitely a season where you think, “It is uncomfortable to talk about sex because I haven't had sex yet or I'm not married yet or I'm too young to talk about it...” There is the idea that people are uncomfortable to talk about and to hear about the topic of sex. There is also a season that I have had in my life where, for shock value, you throw out terms like masturbation, pornography, bestiality, and whatever else you want to say. There is a thrill of getting people excited and people come up to you and say, “wow, you're so brave” when in fact you are just stupid and have no tact.

Sex is not the biggest topic in the Bible, but it is also not something we can avoid. Sex is not something that is used for shock value to show the non-believing world, “Hey! Christians have sex too! In fact, they have the best kind of sex!” (which may or may not be objectively true). At the same time, we need to understand that this is a topic that has to come up. It has to come up because if we don't talk about it, others will.

Because I knew we were going to talk about this passage and the concept of sex, I've been talking to some parents and families and trying to get a sense of how comfortable are we as a congregation to talk about this topic of sex. I, Pastor Enoch, am not brave. I'm just ignorant of people's fear and sensitivities and the Bible talks about it so I just relay the message. I promise it is not courage at all –foolishness maybe, but foolishness that believes that this is the Word of God.

I talked to my boys this week. I asked them, “Hey, this week we're talking about sex... how many of your teachers talk about sex?” They all said “never”. I then asked, “How about at lunch? Do your friends talk about sex or do you hear other people talk about sex?” It turns out that one of them has. I asked, “Well do you talk about sex with them?” and one of my boys responded, “No. I sit at lunch with some boys and they talk about sex. They say so-and-so is sexy.” If told you I

have three boys, a 1st grader, a 3rd grader, and a 6th grader, and one of them heard some boys at lunch talking about sex, everyone would think that it would be the older son. The only son of mine that sits at school day after day and hears other boys talk about sex is my 1st grader.

I asked him, “Do you remember what I said about sex?” He said, “They think of sex differently. They think sexy means pretty.” Sexy means someone you want to have sex with and so if you call someone sexy, that’s a way of saying they are attractive. The key thing I’m thankful to God for is that my son heard other people talk about sex and thought, “That is different from what I was taught and that is different from what I’ve already been imprinted on.”

I was reading the Bible with my sons one day and we got to the part the said, “Thou shalt not lie with a horse.” My son asked me, “What does that mean, baba?” I had to explain to him what it meant to lie with someone. “Now, don’t do that with a horse.”

When we were in New Hampshire at a state fair, there was a whole table of knives and weapons. I took off a butterfly knife off of the table. I told my boys, “You shouldn’t be afraid of knives. Like guns, fire, everything, you need to respect it.” I unfolded the knife and the people around me were really surprised and proceeded to ask me, “Do you know kung-fu?”

The idea here is that I pray for Christians, whether you’re a parent raising young children or you’re just someone coming to faith. If the church does not talk about things like sex and marriage at crucial, strategic times of development, at crucial times in our lives, then we are always catching up. In painting a picture afterwards, we have to erase the page and then write back on the page what God says about sex. What if, instead, the first thing you ever hear about sex, about knives, about fire, about funerals, about death, about ethnicity and race, let it be from someone who loves you and who, hopefully, is trying to share with you God’s plan, God’s vision of those things.

As parents, we have that responsibility. I would love it if I asked you where you learned about sex and you said, “Oh, I learned it at church”, especially if you have non-Christian parents, immigrant non-Christian parents that are too busy working. It’s so hard to even have time with kids and they didn’t grow up in a culture where parents sat down to explain things to their children. A lot of these urban kids have parents who can’t even speak English and don’t know how to say the terms regarding to sex.

I would love it if the first impressions people hear were not from a sleepover with peers or on the bathroom wall or some internet spam email. Let it be because someone lovingly, wisely,

sensitively, and with appropriate permission, talked to them. Let the first impression be God's breath of fresh air and vision of what these topics are.

The Corinthian church asked Paul because in the Greek dualistic philosophy of that day, people were considered to be two parts: soul and body. The Greeks believed the soul was more important than the body and so there are two ways to paths one could take using that Greek dualism: one path would be to live out the philosophy is to do whatever with the body and that was very common in that day. However, these Christians were struggling because they wanted to honor God with their bodies. The only world view they had to honor God with their bodies, which was the outworking of the other side of Greek dualism. If the mind is important and the body is not as important, one thing to do is to run amuck with your body, but the other way to do things is to deny your body pleasures. These Christians want to honor God with their bodies and they don't think the drunken orgies thing is a good idea, so they're seeking advice from Paul. They're essentially saying, "It's not right for a man to have sexual relations with a woman and we want to glorify Jesus with our bodies." They asked their pastor and their pastor gave them a letter.

You need to ask your pastor. You need to ask your small group leader. Kids, you need to ask your Sunday school teacher. You need to be appropriate and carefully about who and when you talk. As a kid, I wouldn't ask an adult individually unless you want to get them arrested. I would definitely not ask them over email. No adult should be emailing a minor about this. The point here is this: sex is a topic that the church needs to help people see, not the alternative vision of sex, but the original. The church should not be helping people see the alternate version of anything, but should be helping people see what God intended. Everything else is alternate.

This is the importance of the topic of marriage and sex. These Corinthians, in their desire to follow God, said, "We were told that the right way to glorify God with your body is to deny all pleasures." Paul basically says, "Thank you for writing this to me and now I'm going to spend a full chapter writing, by hand, what the Bible says about that" and he does. Friends, practically speaking, whether you're a young person, single person, married person, a divorced person, a widow, this is a topic we need to recognize the church needs to share God's good vision about these things.

That is the importance of sex and marriage as a topic. Much of the letter is just Paul answering questions. Church, beloved, we need to understand that the Bible speaks to these things and we must not be afraid to address the topics the Bible speaks so plainly about.

2. A fundamental principle of sex for marriage

Secondly, after the importance of marriage and sex as a topic, to help the church and help the Word of God explain to people what his vision for these topics, Paul gives us a fundamental principle for sex and marriage. I'm not saying *the* fundamental principle, but *a* fundamental principle for sex in marriage.

We see this now in verse 2:

² But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. ³ The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. ⁴ 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.

Now, he's saying, basically, "Corinthian church, you asked about the phrase that states to not touch another person sexually, but not only is it okay to do that, you, if you are married, you have a responsibility to your spouse." Whether you're married to that spouse or you haven't met your spouse yet, you and I always have a sexual responsibility to that spouse, unless you have the gift of singleness.

Paul is basically talking about this idea of oneness. We've talked about it as a church. If you've ever gone to a BCEC wedding, we've talked about two people, a man and a woman, coming together to become one in Christ. It's marriage. Paul describes this oneness in the realm of sexuality. He is saying the wife doesn't own her body anymore. She doesn't control her body and her body doesn't belong to herself. It belongs to her husband. In a radical elevation of women, Paul also adds: the husband's body belongs to the wife.

This is important because this could have gotten Paul in trouble. In the Roman culture, men could have sex outside of marriage but women were forbidden. For Paul to say the wife's body belongs to the husband, and likewise, the husband's body belongs to the wife, this is pretty equal and incredibly mutual oneness. The idea that your body, once you are married is no longer yours; it belongs to your spouse. He's basically saying you are not your own, you belong to your spouse now, and because of that you have a responsibility and obligation to be together. I don't think I've ever heard a sermon about conjugal rights, but here we are in the ESV.

³The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband

What is a fundamental principle here? The idea is: your body belongs to your spouse. This goes far beyond sex. This is about health. This is about taking care of yourself. In this context, Paul is talking about sex. Let it be that your body is used in the service of your spouse.

I want to talk about various stages of life. There is pre-married, married, and post-married.

Let's start with marriage since it is the easiest to understand. Sex is not about you. Sex is not about your pleasure primarily and it's not even primarily about making babies. Sex is primarily a way to serve one's spouse in a way that should be reserved only for the spouse. Sex is not about my pleasure or having children, but serving my spouse and giving him or her pleasure and, in doing that, to have the opportunity to have children. That is what sex is. Like everything else in marriage. As we talk about sex, sex is an opportunity to serve the person in a way that no one else can. Sex is not a bad thing. Sex is the ultimate way to serve your spouse by giving him or her pleasure and, in the course of that, God may bless you with children.

Now why is that a challenge? Because those of us in the Christian world struggle with purity and lust. One of the easiest, common tactics to address this is by trying to resist lustful thoughts and labeling sex as being bad. Basically, it's dirty; I associate sex with impurity, selfishness, and pornography. One of the common things with guys especially, when you come to a place where you're trying to not sleep with anyone and save yourself for the person you really want to spend the rest of your life with, you try to convince yourself that sex is bad and you need to not think about it. When you get married, you're going to have problems because you associate sex with dirtiness, impurity, and pornography. You might win the victory of repelling the struggles and temptations of lust, but in doing so, you have hampered and crimped something about the sexual drive God has given each one of us. It is not only not wrong to touch your spouse sexually, but Paul says that you have a responsibility because of the principle that your body is not your body; it belongs to your spouse.

Sex is a distinct, unique way to serve your spouse. As we understand that, let's apply this principle. This is so wild because it was so true then and it is still so true today. He applies this principle to not giving someone else sexual pleasure and holding sex back from your spouse. This is what this next passage is about.

3. The application of this principle

Beginning now, in verse 5:

⁵ 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.

As we apply this, Paul is applying this principle that sex is a way to serve your spouse, if you are married, to the idea of depriving sex. It is this way: he is applying it to alternative uses of sex. There are other ways of using sex. You can be a virgin and still employ or experience these ways of using sex. If you're not going to have sex together as a couple, let it be by mutual agreement, for a specific amount of time, and for a purpose.

The ways to abuse that wrongly is, first of all, you don't have sex not by mutual agreement, but because one person says no. This is the whole idea of using sex to get what you want. In marriages, when a spouse uses sex as a way of punishment or a form of getting back at someone, then that's not the principle here. Sex is not meant to be an ultimate "get you" kind of tool. You can abuse it by refusing sex for the wrong reasons. That doesn't mean whenever the spouse wants to have sex it's just sex; it just means that when you don't have sex, we need to critically think and ask God, "Is the reason why I don't want to have sex normal, practical, or emotional?" It's one thing to say, "I don't want to have sex right now because I don't feel emotionally close to you" and it's another thing to say, "I'm mad at you so no sex." Once we go that realm, Paul says we are using this powerful tool in a way that it was not intended.

I say this tenderly because it is possible that you've experienced this or felt this way. This works in dating too, but instead of sex it is physical affection. There is a difference "I'm mad at you and I'm not going to let you hold my hand" versus "I'm going to make you work for it for while." There is a subtle difference and a fine line that I'm not sure I can draw for each person. If we look at beauty and physical affection, even of the platonic kind, the way we look at those things can be ways that we abuse it. Not just for a time, but the idea for an important purpose.

What is the reason that Paul gave for why a man and a woman should not have sex? Because they're too tired? Because they have had enough kids? What is it? Paul says, if you don't have sex, you should pray more. "Well if instead of spending this evening being romantic and eventually culminating in a sexual encounter, well, if you agree to pray, that's okay." He says "perhaps that's okay". It's kind of wild because it is so easy to use something like sex to hurt the

people we are angry at. It is so easy to use physical affection and that is why abuse is so powerful and so damaging.

Paul is saying that if you apply this idea of oneness and that your body is not your own, then by all means, don't stop having sex unless there is mutual agreement and for a good reason because sex will help you grow spiritually. That is what sex is for: to help you and your spouse spiritually and physically connect so your marriage relationship can be richer and deeper. This is God's vision applied to the issue of "what do I do when she doesn't want to have sex?" You need to understand the context of the situation and you need to talk about that. It is one thing to talk about the issue and it is another thing to deny sex completely, to be a tease, or to use sex as a way to hurt or manipulate your spouse.

This is a critical application. For pre-married people, the way you view beauty and physical affection will determine how you view sex and marriage. For post-married people, some of us in this room have gone through divorce, have had a spouse pass on, or have a spouse sick and physically unable, these are still issues that you need to ask your pastor, your small group leader about. God has wisdom that may not be easy to apply or easy to figure out, but we as a church need to see sex as not a topic we need to be taboo about, but to ask what we can say and do to glorify Jesus through our understanding of marriage and sex.

In the case of this, we need to remember that sex is about oneness and that your body does not belong to yourself, but to your spouse. In cases where one spouse doesn't want to have sex, Paul says that you better have a good reason for not having sex. This is such a rich vision of the relationship.

Let's go back and move past the sex. This is really built upon the idea of marriage, the connection between husband and wife. Some of us are wondering, "Oh, is Enoch going to go to the topic of gay marriage?" It is definitely a hot topic today and I think our church has been very clear about this topic. Paul even uses terms like "between a man and a wife" or a "woman and her husband". This is not about homosexual marriage or heterosexual marriage; this is simply Paul speaking about the nature of marriage, which has implications for debate, and the nature of that oneness of giving yourself fully to the other person.

Here is where it starts to have some application for us. How has your view of sex been informed? I will talk to couples who are already married, who are engaged, or who are dating, and it is amazing how most of the people get their impressions of sex from their friends and the media. If I look at my children and their foundation of their understanding of sex comes from television

shows and their friends, that is ridiculous, sad, hysterical, and frankly scary. That is not how someone should learn about such the important topic of sex and marriage.

If you are like that and you realize you don't know anything about sex because your parents never talked to you about it, then you need to understand that you are still being informed somehow. You need to be ready to address that and say, "Okay God, show me what in my view of sex in line with your rich vision and what do I really need to give up?" We need to identify if we have an unrealistic idea of physical pleasure, if we have a selfish view of sex, if we use sex as a tool for manipulation, or if we even view sex as a form of recreational activity.

Where are we getting our notions of sex? Conversely, how are we contributing to a healthy, Biblical view of sex? If you're a parent, that is probably the first thing you're going to think about and ask, "how am I going to pass on this view to my children?" If you're a youth worker or teacher, what is an appropriate way, in your field, where you can be an example and talk about sex in a Biblical, healthy way? If you're a leader, how do we talk about sex? If you're someone who has gone through this, can we come back and say, "Okay, I need to write a letter to someone like my pastor or spiritual mentor and talk about a topic I have never talked to anyone about."

In our pre-marital counseling sessions, we dedicate one out of six sessions to talking about sexual intimacy. That thirty minutes compared to the hundreds of hours spent looking at stuff online, listening to music, and talking to friends? I am not foolish enough to think that those thirty minutes is enough to overwhelm all the other inputs you've had in your entire life. There are so many expectations we have that are probably not helpful to lasting marriages.

Friends, this is an important topic. They wrote to Paul asking about the appropriateness of sex and Paul responded saying that sex is good. The fundamental principle is that sex is part of the oneness that God built and, more than that, we need to be able to talk about it in appropriate, constructive ways. If you talk to children young enough, they won't know that you're messing up when you try to explain the birds and the bees. However, they will know that the first person they heard about sex from was a person who loved Jesus and wanted them to have a precious view of what it means to consider sex and marriage.

It's not just sex, it's any topic. If you struggle with anything, talk to one of our pastors or our staff people or leaders. The staff people are not be-all-end-all but we're here and a lot of people in this church are serving you as volunteers and they're here for you too. Whatever your issue is, this passage says that it is not off-limits to ask someone who can spiritually help because the

gospel says Christ redeemed every part of you, and because of that, we can come to Jesus and ask him for hope and help.

If you want to talk about giving your body, Jesus, in a way that is far more profound and intimate than sex, gave His own body and He treated it not as His own. That is why God punished Jesus' body on the cross and rewards us for new resurrection bodies in the coming age. The more you understand that Jesus not only created sex, but redeemed sex, the more we can brave the scary idea of talking about sex and other topics that we struggle with so very much.

Let's bow our heads and close our eyes and reflect on that for a moment.