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A detailed, grayscale illustration of a multi-cylinder internal combustion engine, shown from a front-three-quarter perspective. The engine is the central focus, with its various components like the intake manifold, belts, and pistons clearly visible.

FIRING ON ALL CYLINDERS

I Corinthians

SMALL GROUP LESSONS

PACKET 3

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FIRING ON ALL CYLINDERS

1 Corinthians

The Discipline of Love

INTRODUCTION

1 Corinthians 5:1-13

R.C. Sproul writes, “The church is called not only to a ministry of reconciliation, but a ministry of nurture to those within her gates. Part of that nurture includes church discipline . . .” The idea of church discipline is totally consistent with the basic purposes of the church—evangelism and edification. Evangelism ministers to those outside the church who are in bondage to sin to bring them to faith in Christ where the transformation process begins. The edification process is designed to build up believers so they can be conformed to the image and character of Christ. Church discipline as a part of the edification process ministers to those within the body of Christ who are dominated by some area of sin so they can experience liberation from its power through fellowship with Christ.

How then do we define church discipline? “Church discipline may be broadly defined as the confrontive and corrective measures taken by an individual, church leaders, or the congregation regarding a matter of sin in the life of a believer.”

“Church discipline is not a group of ‘pious policemen’ out to catch a criminal. Rather, it is a group of brokenhearted brothers and sisters seeking to restore an erring member of the family.”¹

The Church in Corinth had lost sight of the importance of the practice of church discipline. Not only had they neglected its practice, they had gone so far as to boast in their tolerance of sin in their midst. Paul calls the church to action, stressing the importance of discipline as part of their responsibility to one another. In their “gracious tolerance” they were endangering not only the sinner but the spiritual health of the entire church. Church discipline isn’t about lording authority over others. It’s about protecting the church’s holiness and testimony, and seeking the redemption of the one caught in sin.

BREAK THE ICE

Can you think of a time that someone showed you “tough love?” What was your response at the moment? What impact did it end up having on you in the long run?

¹Taken from VBC Church Discipline Guidelines found at: <https://villagebible.church/discipline/>

READ IT

Read 1 Corinthians 5:1-13

EXPLORE IT

1. What particular sin is Paul addressing in this passage?
2. What is the church's attitude toward this sin? What does Paul say about their attitude toward it?
3. What does Paul advise the church to do with the man caught in this sin and what is the ultimate goal?
4. What distinction does Paul make between how the believers should interact with those inside and outside the church who are living in sin?

APPLY IT

Incest is condemned repeatedly in the Old Testament (Lev 18:8; Deut 22:30; 27:20). Even the pagan Romans found such behavior scandalous. The Roman orator Cicero, in fact, said incest was virtually unheard of in Roman society (Vaughn, 1 Corinthians, 56). But amazingly, what Hebrews and Romans found inconceivable, the Corinthians condoned. This church out-tolerated the tolerance of an obscene Roman culture. In the process they invited the criticism and ridicule of the lost world. The pagan Romans did not applaud the super-tolerant church. They mocked it. They did not cheer. They jeered. An impure church will soon be a powerless church. The tolerance of habitual, unrepentant, and public sin robs the gospel of its beauty and the church of its witness. Perhaps, for a season, the church's open-mindedness will be celebrated. In time, however, it will be lampooned and scorned. Eventually, a morally compromising church will be ignored altogether. A church that looks and acts like the world is of the world. There is no difference.²

² Akin, p 103-104

5. What are the dangers of a church becoming so tolerant of sin that it starts to resemble the world?

6. How does a church's moral compromise damage its message and mission?

Paul's concern for the Corinthian church wasn't just that sin was taking place among its members but with the church's attitude and response to it happening. As Daniel Akin notes:

"What is certain is they took great pride in their tolerance of sin when the proper response to it should have been "grief." In the spirit of Ezra, who owned and mourned over the nation's sins (Ezra 9), the church should mourn over the sins of its members. A sin-sick church will boast, "We are affirming and accepting." A gospel-filled church will mourn, "We are sinful and undone." It will readily acknowledge it is a community of repenting sinners. What God calls sin, this church calls sin. What God fights against, this church fights against. The issue is not one of perfection; it is an issue of purity."³

7. What dangers are there for believers who find themselves "stunted" in their spiritual growth and aren't maturing out of their spiritual infancy? What steps can we take if we find ourselves in this position?

³ Akin, p 105

8. What are some reasons a church might avoid practicing church discipline?

9. What challenges might a church face if it chooses to practice church discipline?

10. How can a church faithfully balance grace and holiness in its practice of church discipline?

“Why does the church take action? Well, not just to get rid of a trouble-maker or not merely to show itself clean in this regard, but rather in order to reach the individuals involved and so deal with them that eventually they will see their wrongdoing and repent. And all judgment ends at repentance; all discipline ceases when repentance occurs. Therefore, the hope here is that when you put someone back into the world, as it were, under Satan's control, that he will learn what worldings will learn if they live long enough -- that the philosophies they are following are delusive, empty and vain, and when they find themselves drained, jaded and empty of heart, they will turn back to the living Lord and their spirits will be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. When he comes or when they meet him in death, their spirits will be saved even though their lives have been wasted. This is the hope and that is the purpose for church discipline”.⁴

11. What is the primary goal of church discipline? How does this goal differ from the common perception of discipline as purely punitive?

12. Ray Stedman says that “all judgment ends at repentance; all discipline ceases when repentance occurs.” Why is repentance a significant part of the discipline process?

⁴ Ray Stedman, I Corinthians Notes

13. Consider the following passages that address church discipline and summarize what each one says about how the church should approach this practice:

1 Corinthians 5:1-13

Matthew 18:15-17

2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14-15

Titus 3:10-11

1 Timothy 5:19-21

Galatians 6:1-2

Luke 17:1-4

James 5:19-20

After reading and reflecting on these passages together, what is your understanding of the purpose and practice of church discipline and how the church should approach it today?

In 1 Corinthians 5:9-13, Paul clarifies that believers aren't to avoid all contact with immoral people in the world, since doing so would mean isolating completely, making gospel impact impossible. It should be no surprise when the world acts like the world – immorality, greed, and idolatry. However, when someone who professes to follow Christ lives like the world, it's a serious issue. God will deal justly with the world. But what about the church? Paul says we hold a responsibility to confront and address sin within the church to protect its integrity and purity.

14. How do we reconcile Paul's charge for Christians to judge those inside the church with what he says in Romans 14:10?

15. In Galatians 6:1-2, Paul says that we are to restore a brother with gentleness and self-awareness. How can you be sure that your own walk with the Lord is in order to help a brother or sister who are struggling in sin?



FIRING ON ALL CYLINDERS

I Corinthians

Sue Me

INTRODUCTION

1 Corinthians 6:1-11

“Let’s kill all the lawyers!”

So says the villainous Dick the Butcher in Shakespeare’s *Henry VI*. The line has been quoted and misquoted in pop culture ever since. Lawyers can evoke strong emotions from all corners, and in this week’s passage, it seems that Paul might share the often negative sentiments many have about lawyers. The topic is, after all, the curious case of Corinthian Christians taking one another to court.

But like the quote from Shakespeare, there is more going on than first glance might lead us to believe. In the case of the famous quote, there is serious debate about what Shakespeare intended. Did he truly mean that lawyers are a blight on society? Possibly not, because the man who says it is truly a scoundrel who wants to overthrow the king and seems to believe that he can control the illiterate masses if he just gets rid of all the lawyers. So lawyers are the ones defending against villains. On the other hand, others argue that the play is all about class and the abuses of the lower class by the upper class—who had better access to lawyers and used them to keep the lower classes in check. On this reading lawyers are mercenaries at best, and probably just bad.

No matter what Shakespeare believed about lawyers, Paul doesn’t have anything against lawyers or courts. Romans 13 outlines a Christian’s duty toward the state and Paul himself used the Roman legal system and his rights as a Roman citizen in Acts.

BREAK THE ICE

What is your favorite portrayal of courtroom drama in books, movies or TV? What is it about the characters that grabs you?

READ IT

Read 1 Corinthians 6:1-11

EXPLORE IT

1. What is the issue Paul deals with in this section? (vv.1, 6)
2. What does Paul base his objection on? (vv. 2-3)
3. What should the believers in Corinth do rather than take one another to court? (v. 7)
4. What does Paul accuse the Corinthians of in v.8?
5. What does Paul remind the Corinthian believers about themselves (v.11)

APPLY IT

At first glance Paul's rather strident correction regarding lawsuits among the church seems both out of left field and somewhat harsh. In chapter 5 he dealt with an issue of incest in the church, and he will return to sexual issues later in this chapter, so lawsuits don't seem to fit. But the connection is not random. Paul has repeatedly dealt with the issue of wisdom and foolishness. The factions that grew up in Corinth, at least in part, had to do with the wisdom the Corinthian believers boasted that they had. These supposedly wise leaders, however, didn't have the sense to exercise church discipline on such a clear violation as seen in chapter 5, one that even the pagans wouldn't tolerate. The issue of lawsuits is the inverse—the Corinthian church doesn't seem to have the wisdom to deal with trivial things, taking them to the gentile courts instead of dealing with them themselves. From lack of wisdom in big things to lack of wisdom in little things, the Corinthian church, which thinks it is wise, is anything but. And the issue is much worse than it seems to us.

The words Paul uses in 6:1 make it clear that we are not talking about criminal, but rather civil proceedings. The Roman civil court system was notoriously corrupt. Today people complain about the legal system being tilted toward the wealthy, that it is virtually impossible for people without means to get a fair shake. The Roman system was worse, and explicitly so. The social influence and standing of someone was expected to tip the scales in his favor. If that didn't work, bribes were both common and accepted. In civil matters, a poor person generally wouldn't even bother to bring a suit because there was no chance of winning. But Paul's concern is deeper than corruption. He makes a direct contrast between the "unrighteous" (v.1, 9), and believers— "saints" (v.1, also implied in v.9). He goes a step further in v.11 reminding them "you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified", highlighting their difference from the unrighteous. The issue is such a big deal that he essentially begins v.1 with "how dare you bring grievances to court!"

6. Do you think that Christians today see this issue as a scandal like Paul does? Why or why not?

7. How can (or does) participating in a blatantly corrupt system affect the ones participating?

8. How does Paul's reminder of the Corinthians' position as members of the Body of Christ, set apart by him and for him, cause us to consider what things we should participate in or not participate in?

Paul gives the Corinthians three reasons why they should not take their grievances before unrighteous courts of the gentiles. First, because believers will judge the world and angels (vv. 2-3), something far greater than the mundane or everyday things of life. Paul's point is not to give a definitive theological understanding about this, rather, he is reminding the Corinthians that the wisdom which they have in Christ is (or should be) both physical and spiritual in nature. This carries directly into his second reason in verses four and five: they should have enough wisdom to handle these kinds of problems on their own.

While there is some difficulty in translating verse 4, it seems like the best translation is that Paul sarcastically criticizes that these believers are taking their civil disputes before a secular court. Paul calls this shameful and sarcastically asks essentially "Isn't there anyone in your church who has enough wisdom to handle these things? Instead, you sue one another in front of unbelievers." It should be noted that Paul is not telling the Corinthian church to hide their problems from the world. Rather, the point is to show the world how to handle these kinds of disputes using spiritual wisdom. Shame was a very big deal in the Greco-Roman world and Paul is essentially telling the Corinthian believers that any standing they had by taking someone else to court has essentially been erased.

The final reason is that participating in these kinds of suits is a defeat in and of itself—it reveals their own unrighteousness. They should prefer to be wronged rather than to wrong their fellow believers. The divisions within the church are exacerbated by these lawsuits. Brutal character assassination and underhanded tactics were the order of the day. Not only would the two opposing parties be fractured, but any clients of those parties would be obligated to support their patron, further fracturing the church.

9. Which of Paul's three reasons is most compelling to you and why?

10. How could handling conflicts internally but publicly be a witness to the world around us?

11. What are some ways that conflict within a church could be handled well?

12. Paul's admonition in verses 7-8 echo his own example (4:12-13) and the instructions of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:38-48). Living to this standard can be one of the most difficult aspects of Christian life. Where do you struggle most in this regard and what are some best practices you have to live as Paul and Christ admonish us?

The final section of this passage sometimes gets the most attention because of its list of vices which is added to the one in 5:9-11. Often this attention is divorced from the section regarding lawsuits but it should not be because Paul has intentionally contrasted the unrighteous with the saints. Gardner states:

In vv. 9-10 the “unrighteous” are shown not to inherit God’s Kingdom. The implicit contrast is that the “saints” will indeed inherit “God’s kingdom.” “The unrighteous,” as Paul speaks of them here, are thus more than just a people involved in the type of immorality and ungodliness he will go on to describe. They are a category of people outside the covenant community. They are not “in Christ” and thus will not inherit all that has been promised to God’s people (see also Gal 5:21). The juxtaposition in the Greek of “the unrighteous” with “God’s kingdom” serves to heighten the contrast between those who will and will not inherit. However, one of the ways of identifying this category of people, the unrighteous, is by their life and works, just as the saints should be able to be identified by their life and works.

Herein lies the power of Paul’s argument. *It is possible for people to be deceived about their status.* Paul’s command to these church members is brief and to the point: “Do not let yourselves be deceived!” . . . They should know that their life and works provide an important indicator to them of their community status. The holy distinctiveness of God’s people must be clearly evident to all.⁵

13. It seems that at least some of the Corinthian church had been deceived about their own unrighteousness. How can we fall prey to similar deception?

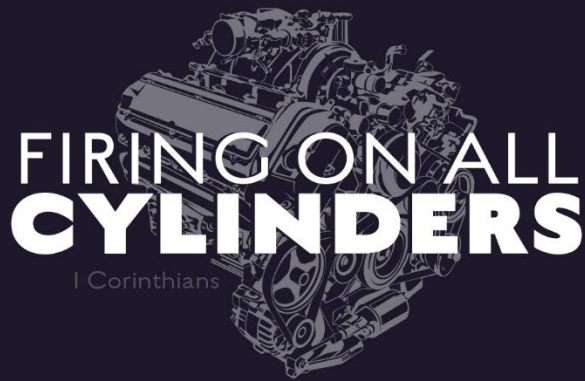
14. God’s kingdom is a kingdom of righteousness, one that is to be lived out now while awaiting its final fulfillment. Why do you think we often slip into believing that God really didn’t mean all of his moral demands? Why is it so hard for an unbelieving world to submit to those demands?

15. The list of vices in verses 9-10 lists ten kinds of habitually immoral people (“men who practice homosexuality” translates two Greek verbs which speaks to both active and passive participants in homosexual acts). Only four from the list are sexual, yet these often get the most attention, why do you think the others don’t get as much attention?

16. The entire list reflects a self-centered attitude, exactly the opposite of Jesus’ ethic and which reflects a lack of spiritual wisdom. How can we better cultivate this kind of spiritual wisdom both individually and corporately?

Paul ends on a hopeful note that serves as a significant reminder “and such were some of you.” God redeemed many from Corinth from unrighteousness, from lives which are opposed to God and which Christians often look down on.

17. How can the reminder that God washes us, sanctifies us and justifies us, give us hope and compassion for those who do not know him? How can this help you from looking down on the unrighteous



Human Sexuality for the Glory of God

INTRODUCTION

1 Corinthians 6:12-20

This is a very powerful passage on the need to avoid sexual immorality. That was a huge problem in Corinth, and it's a huge problem today. Paul offers an unbeatable argument why a Christian cannot engage in sexual immorality: we are the creation of God, the possession of Christ, and the temple of the Holy Spirit.

We know that Corinth had a low morality. If Paul's letter is any indication, they had a big problem with casual sex. My guess is that sometime during this lesson, you will have a chance to point out that the pressure to have casual sex (to “hook up”) has been a part of every generation. Wherever people have gone to find a date (the club, the bar, the frat party, eHarmony), there have been people there to pressure you into going back to their place and having sex. Without letting conversation get lewd, if this topic comes up, share a time when you felt peer pressure to become sexually active. We think of the Woodstock generation as the “free sex” generation, but as far as I can tell, **things are worse today**. (Note: not among high school students—those numbers are trending down. It's college students and young professionals who are becoming more promiscuous.)

Sex outside of marriage is wrong. The Bible is clear about that. And so the response for a Christian of any generation is to say no to those suggestions and accept the social backlash. Why should you care? Because at the very least you have kids or grandkids or friends who are struggling through the mess of dating.⁶

BREAK THE ICE

What things in life bring you the most joy and happiness?

⁶ <https://www.fbcthomson.org/post/sexual-immorality-offends-god-a-study-of-1-corinthians-6-12-20>

READ IT

Read 1 Corinthians 6:12-20

EXPLORE IT

1. The Apostle Paul writes that while all things may be lawful, they may not all be _____.
2. What is the future state of food and the stomach?
3. What is your body meant for?
4. What will ultimately happen to our bodies as Christians?
5. How should we deal with sexual immorality?
6. Christians' bodies were bought by God for a price. What was that price and therefore, what should we do with our bodies?

APPLY IT

Does God just arbitrarily pick and choose what is “sin” and what is not? Some in our world think that Christians are repressed and living an outdated religion that is trying to control them. In their mind, God has just picked and chosen what one should or shouldn’t do. The remedy that our world takes is first, follow your desires/be your authentic self and second, anything is fair game as long as it is not against the law. As we dig into this passage, we see that the Corinthians had a similar way of doing things. One of their slogans was “all things are lawful for me”, meaning that they thought they had license to live their lives on their own terms. They would also say that it was ok to follow their desires by saying things like “food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food.” This logic gets applied specifically to their sexual desires. They thought that since they had sexual desire then it was ok to satisfy that desire and not exercise restraint or self control. Since there is food for the stomach when you’re hungry then it must be ok to satisfy your sexual desires when they pop up. Does this sound familiar to the world we live in? In our present day to deny your desires is similar to denying yourself. Our world tells you to pursue authenticity, self discovery and to fulfill your desires. Sure there are some boundaries in our culture like pursuing sexual fulfillment with consent, but the guiding principle is that if you desire something you should chase after it.

What the world does not see is how controlling living this way can be. What if we should instead think in terms of what is helpful, what is controlling me and how we can honor God with our bodies?

Paul corrects the Corinthians view of sexual relationships by showing them that guiding principle and reminding them that they are no longer their own but are one with Christ.⁷

7. What are the Corinthians trying to justify when they say “all things are lawful for me” and “food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food?”

8. The Corinthian church was a church filled with young believers, with most having followed Christ for under 3 years. Not many came from a “Christian” home and they did not have access to all of the New Testament in the same way modern Christians do. How do you think this contributed to their attitude concerning their sexual practices?

⁷ <https://westhills.org/blog/2021/06/19/1-corinthians-6-12-20-study-guide-bought-with-a-price>

9. According to this passage, why is sex a gift to be guarded and protected? Does this passage have a high view of sex or a low view of sex? Why?

10. Look at the following verses and craft a statement, describing God's prescription for a healthy and holy sex life:

Genesis 2:24

Leviticus 18:22

Exodus 20:14

Matthew 5:27-28

Ephesians 5:3

Romans 1:26-27

Galatians 5:19

2 Corinthians 12:21

Hebrews 13:4

Turning Away From the World

I say that just to say this: unless you really know the Lord Jesus Christ, unless you're a Christian, unless you understand what it is to live for God, this kind of a morality is going to seem a little bit in left field, but this is what the Bible teaches.

You see, the Corinthians had rationalized their sexual activity just like people today do. There are plenty of people who, in the name of religion, say, "Yeah, everything's taken care of. We're free in religion. Christianity's made us free, so, we live it up."

There are plenty of other people – don't you hear this all the time? – say, "What's the big deal about sex? It's only biology, right? We're only animals. You don't get upset when dogs do it; why do you get upset when we do it?" You hear this all the time, "Man, it's just a biological thing. It's there. You go; you do it; you don't get all uptight about it. It's amoral."

Well, the Corinthians had done the same thing. And, of course, they had a problem, too, because they lived in the city of Corinth. And Corinth was synonymous with sex. In fact, the verb "to corinthianize" meant to have sex with a prostitute. That's how attached Corinth was to that kind of life.

So, they were saying, "Hey, our environment is overwhelming, and, man, we figured out theologically it's all right, and philosophically it's just a biological act, and no big deal. So, we're doing it."

So, here are the Corinthians, carrying another one of the cruddy things of their former life into the church. And this is the problem with every single difficulty the Corinthian church had.⁸

11. It is possible that the Corinthian Christians had misunderstood their freedom in Christ and adopted the slogan "All things are possible for me." If so, how does Paul clarify that idea without denigrating their true freedom? What illustrations does he use and how?

12. Paul subtly states that the physical bodies of believers have a future purpose and are important (see 6:13-14). How does this truth practically relate to the problem in Corinth? How does it impact you and your battle with sin?

⁸ <https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/1827/christian-liberty-and-sexual-freedom>

13. What do you think Paul means by “every other sin a man commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral man sins against his own body”?

14. What does it mean practically - and personally for you - to remember that your physical body is a temple (or sanctuary, dwelling place) of the Holy Spirit, that you were bought with a price, and that, therefore, you should glorify God in your body?

15. How do you “flee sexual immorality?” What are some current best practices? Do you have someone in your life who can help hold you accountable in this area of sexual purity?

Sex For the Glory of God

G.K. Chesterton's description of the world's joys applies: these amount to merely "small publicity" when set next to the Christian's "gigantic secret" of joy (Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* [William Cloves & Sons, 1932], 296). The gigantic secret of the joy of sex is this: Sex is good because the God who created sex is good. And God is glorified greatly when we receive his gift with thanksgiving — for the gift points back to the God who gave it — and enjoy it the way he meant for it to be enjoyed.

How do we know this is true? We know it's true because of its place in the Bible. "The Bible is a book about marriage." That's the way David Hubbard put it in his commentary on the Song of Solomon (Hubbard, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, The Communicator's Commentary* [Word, 1991], 267). To say the Bible is a book about marriage is to say that it is also a book about sex and the meaning of sex. For marriage is the only natural condition for the pleasure of sex.⁹

16. Where do you think most of your understanding about sex has come from—family, church, friends, media, or other influences? How do you think those sources have shaped your views, and how does that align with a biblical perspective on sex?"

17. While we'll discuss this in more detail next week, how do you see the Church engaging with the cultural conversations surrounding sex?

Studies were compiled and questions were written by Steve Lomardo (Plano Campus Pastor)

⁹ <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/the-goodness-of-sex-and-the-glory-of-god>



FIRING ON ALL CYLINDERS

1 Corinthians

Love and Marriage

INTRODUCTION

1 Corinthians 7:1-9

C.S. Lewis once compared sex in marriage to a fire. In *Mere Christianity*, he wrote, “The Christian idea of marriage is based on Christ’s words that man and wife are to be regarded as a single organism...the Christian attitude does not mean that there is anything wrong about sexual pleasure, any more than about the pleasure of eating. It means that you must not isolate that pleasure and try to get it by itself.” This imagery paints a clear picture—when the fire of intimacy is contained within marriage, it warms and strengthens the relationship. But when that fire is misused or escapes the boundaries of marriage, it can bring pain and destruction.

In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul speaks to the beauty and boundaries of this gift. In verses 3-5 he writes, “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.”

Paul is clear: sexual intimacy is a gift from God to be enjoyed and protected within the covenant of marriage. It is not a weapon or a tool for manipulation, but a means of serving and loving one another. Unfortunately, in our culture today, sex is often distorted. Statistics show that over 40% of married couples report dissatisfaction with their sex lives, and about 15-20% of marriages are classified as “sexless” (defined as couples having sex fewer than 10 times per year). This is a stark reminder of how easily we can lose sight of God’s design for intimacy.

As married couples, when we embrace God’s gift of intimacy, we not only strengthen our marriages but also reflect the oneness that God has designed for us. Amanda and I have learned this lesson over the years. Like many couples, we’ve had to be intentional about every aspect of our relationship, including physical intimacy. Our commitment to prioritizing this area has played a huge role in deepening our emotional and spiritual bond. When we cherish and protect this gift, we honor the covenant we made before God and experience His blessing.

Paul even warns against neglecting intimacy. He says that if we deprive one another, even for spiritual reasons, it should be brief and with mutual consent. Otherwise, we leave the door open for temptation. Intimacy in marriage is not just a physical act but a spiritual one that guards and strengthens the bond between husband and wife.

But Paul’s message in 1 Corinthians 7 is not only for married couples. He also addresses singles, offering guidance on the beauty of singleness and its role in the kingdom of God. In verse 7, Paul writes, “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.” Singleness, like marriage, is a gift from God. For those who are single, this season (or lifetime) is not a waiting room for something better. It’s an opportunity to devote oneself fully to God and His work. Paul encourages those who are unmarried to see their singleness as a blessing and to focus on living a life of undivided devotion to the Lord.

So whether you are married or single, God has a plan for your life. For those who are married, the call is to cherish the gift of intimacy and use it to strengthen your marriage. For those who are single, the call is to embrace this season as a gift and use it for God’s glory. Both marriage and singleness are pathways to honoring God, and each has its own unique blessings.

APPLY IT

Few topics touch us more than sexuality and marriage. Sex and marriage are powder kegs. They touch on some of the most intimate parts of who we are. We have a lot in common, but our stories are unique.

- *Some of us have witnessed happy marriages. Some of us have not.*
- *Some of us are in happy marriages. Some of us are not.*
- *Some of us are single and are content in our singleness. Others are single and long to be married.*
- *Some of us have been deeply wounded by the actions of others, or how others — including in the church — have talked about things like sex, purity, singleness, and marriage.*

So I want to approach the topic of sexuality and marriage with a lot of care as we look at this passage today. Just a note as we begin. This passage is not a comprehensive manual on marriage and singleness. There's a lot of truth here that we need to listen to and apply, but it's not the only passage we need to examine in the Bible.

In fact, it's written to deal with a particular concern in Corinth. We read what the concern is in verse 1: "Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: 'It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.' We've already seen that some in Corinth believed that sex was no big deal. It's just something that you do with your body. Last week, [we learned] that what we do with our bodies is very important to God. Your body matters because it belongs to God.

But that leaves a question. What do we do with our sexual desires, especially in a world with a lot of conflicting messages of sexuality? Is it okay to have sex? Does following Jesus mean that sex somehow becomes less important or even something that you don't do anymore?¹⁰

4. What is it about this topic that makes people feel so uneasy, should this be the case for believers? Why or Why not?

5. In a world that sends us so many conflicting messages about sexuality, how can we as Christians understand and navigate our sexual desires in a way that honors God? What role does the Bible play in shaping our views on sex and relationships?

¹⁰ <https://www.dashhouse.com/about-your-sexuality-and-marital-status-1-corinthians-7/>

In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul responds to various concerns and misconceptions about marriage, celibacy, and sexuality within the Corinthian church. The congregation appears to have been divided into three camps:

Ascetic View (Sex is Bad)

This group believed that sexual relations, even within marriage, were inherently sinful or spiritually detrimental. Their reasoning was rooted in an overemphasis on asceticism, perhaps influenced by Greek philosophical ideas that downplayed or denied the goodness of physical desires. Some members of the Corinthian church felt that celibacy was the holier way to live, viewing abstinence as a means of attaining greater spiritual purity.

"Paul's correction of the ascetic view reasserts the goodness of sexual relations in marriage, emphasizing that denying this can lead to temptation and strain in the marital relationship" ¹¹

- 6. Some early Christians in Corinth believed that sexual relations, even in marriage, were spiritually damaging and that celibacy was a path to greater holiness. How might similar views about sex being sinful or impure still influence Christians today?**

¹¹ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 1987.

Permissive/Animalistic View (Sex as a Natural Appetite)

This camp viewed sex as a biological necessity, similar to eating or drinking—an animalistic impulse that needed to be satisfied when desired. They believed that sexual behavior, whether inside or outside marriage, was a natural part of human life and held no deeper spiritual significance. Their logic may have been influenced by slogans such as "Food is for the stomach and the stomach for food" (1 Corinthians 6:13), which reduced sex to a purely physical activity.

"The Corinthian error of equating sexual behavior with other bodily appetites like hunger shows their failure to understand the sacredness of the body, which Paul argues is set apart for the Lord and not for immoral indulgence"¹²

7. In today's culture, the belief that sex is just a natural, biological impulse is common. How do you think this mindset impacts the way Christians view sexual ethics?

¹² Garland, 1 Corinthians: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, 2003

Sex as Beautiful and God-Given (A Biblical View of Sexuality)

This third group viewed sex within marriage as something beautiful, God-given, and vital to the marital relationship. They believed that sex was not only a way to produce children or satisfy physical desires but also a profound means of bonding spouses together in a unique and intimate way. This view aligns with the biblical teaching that sex is a gift from God, designed to cement the marriage relationship and create a deep emotional and spiritual connection between husband and wife.

"Paul's recognition of the beauty and importance of sexual relations within marriage reflects the broader biblical theme that sex is a God-given gift meant to foster intimacy and unity between spouses"¹³

8. In what ways has the church succeeded or struggled in portraying sex within marriage as a sacred, intimate act designed by God for the bond between husband and wife? How can we better reflect this view in church teachings and culture?

9. Looking back at your upbringing, what messages did you receive about sex—was it seen as something to be avoided, merely a physical need to be filled however you can, or a gift designed by God for marriage? How have those early influences impacted your current understanding of sexuality and relationships?

¹³ Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 2000

Now we read this phrase, “now concerning the matters about which you wrote.” These are the Corinthians’ concerns. This is the first of six times that we will see Paul use this phrase. It will take us all the way through the rest of the letter. Chapters one through six are about Paul’s concerns and chapters seven through sixteen are about the Corinthians’ concerns.

It is important for us to recognize, especially here, that Paul is not giving us his systematic theology about everything he has ever thought about the subject of marriage. Here he is dealing with one specific question and giving one specific answer and so we have to understand what he says here in that context and not try to pretend that this is the whole teaching of Christianity on the subject of marriage.

10. The Corinthians sought pastoral guidance on questions about the Christian life, particularly regarding sex and relationships. What questions about sex and relationships do you think the church needs to address today?

Marriage is designed to be a safe place for physical intimacy. Spouses are free to be physically vulnerable with each other because they are stuck together forever. Marriage is also meant to be a guard against immorality. The goal is that spouses find satisfaction in each other so neither looks for satisfaction elsewhere; that’s **Proverbs 5:18**, “**May your fountain be blessed, and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth. A loving doe, a graceful deer—may her [body]—there’s another euphemism—satisfy you always, may you ever be intoxicated with her love.**” That’s a word from a father to a son—“don’t compare your wife with other women. Don’t compare her with how she looked ten years ago. Be satisfied with her now.” If for some reason any man finds that chaffing, listen to GK Chesterton, “**Keeping to one woman is a small price for so much as seeing one woman.**”

The Christian view of marriage takes the one flesh union we studied last week seriously. The two are one; this system is sufficient for satisfaction; verse 4, “**The wife’s body does not belong to her alone but also to her husband. In the same way, the husband’s body does not belong to him alone but also to his wife.**” That’s the one flesh union—each belongs to the other.

Now we need to be careful here because the idea behind this is not, “you are commanded to please me when I want and how I want.” The idea is not that satisfaction is a husband’s pleasure and a wife’s obligation as it has been understood. The idea is that the man and wife are a team; they are one. He should make it his interest to please her. She should make it her interest to please him; that’s verse 3, “**The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband.**” This is about each partner giving of themselves for the other and to the other in all they are and each partner growing to be worthy of that gift; the idea is that both husband and wife should be fulfilled, and each should be more interested in the other’s fulfillment than in their own.¹⁴

¹⁴ <https://www.dustinthelight.org/topical-preaching/2021/5/25/1-corinthians-71-9-intimacy-in-and-out-of-marriage>

11. How does the concept of "self-giving" in marriage, where both spouses prioritize each other's fulfillment, challenge common cultural views on personal satisfaction within relationships?

12. In what ways can couples actively cultivate satisfaction in each other, as Proverbs 5:18 and verse two suggest, to safeguard their relationship from outside temptations and comparisons?

This requires talking about this area of your marriage. This means having a realistic view of how often physical intimacy is expected. This means having an understanding of what leads to amorous satisfaction.

Men need to understand women and women need to understand men. Men need to understand that relational intimacy precedes satisfying physical intimacy. Listening to your wife thoughtfully, taking an interest in what interests her, pursuing unity with her because you actually want to —this is what stirs her affections. Physical intimacy really does start with the dishes.

Women need to understand that while they are, as they say, like a crockpot, warming up slowly in a more holistic way, men are much more like microwaves. They are on immediately and they turn off just as fast. When a man expects his wife to be a microwave, there are problems. When a woman faults her husband for not being a crockpot, there are problems. God has put you together with someone unlike you so that you can learn how to love the other. Isn't that a Christian ethic—learning to love someone who is unlike you?

Mark Clark is right when he says that we should never get naked and vulnerable with a person only physically without getting naked and vulnerable with them in every other way: socially, economically, geographically, spiritually, and emotionally. To do anything else will always end in catastrophe.¹⁵

13. What are some common excuses or reasons couples may intentionally or unintentionally deprive each other of intimacy, and how can they address these issues to strengthen their relationship?

14. What important conversations do couples need to have about their different expectations and needs regarding physical intimacy, and how can they create an understanding that leads to deeper relational and physical satisfaction?

¹⁵ The Problem of God: Answering a Skeptic's Challenges to Christianity

If sex is good, we should all get married and have lots of sex, right? Not so fast, Paul says. Sex and marriage are not everything. Jesus, the most perfect human being who ever lived, was single and did not have sex. And so Paul makes a compelling case in this passage that if you are single, you are not second class. In fact, singleness has some advantages over being married. It's a very valid option for your life. Paul says "To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single, as I am." (7:8)...It's not wrong to pursue marriage, but sex and marriage aren't everything. It's just as valid and maybe even better for you to remain single. Your marital status isn't the most important thing about you. Your identity as a son or daughter of God is the most important thing about you.¹⁶

15. How does Jesus' example as a single person reshape the way we view singleness within Christian life and community?

16. How can singles find contentment and purpose in their relationship with God, especially when society often emphasizes marriage and romantic relationships?

17. How can married and single people within the church support each other in living out their unique callings without emphasizing marital status?

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¹⁶ <https://www.dashhouse.com/about-your-sexuality-and-marital-status-1-corinthians-7/>