



October 25, 2009

1 Corinthians 7

“Singleness, Marriage, Sex and Divorce”

Pastor Gary Hamrick

Paul takes the first six chapters to rebuke the Corinthian church for their lack of maturity and their sinful behavior. And by the time we get to chapter seven, Paul finally starts to answer questions they sent him previously. (**1 Corinthians 7:1**) One of the things they were confused about was the whole matter of singleness, marriage, sex and divorce.

There are a number of reasons why they would be confused about these issues, including conflicting views about physical pleasure. In Paul’s day, there were two predominant views in the church about things physical/sensual. The first view held that your body doesn’t matter; only your spirit matters, therefore, it doesn’t really matter what you do with your body. The second view held that your body and all its physical urges and pleasures are evil, so sex under any circumstance was wrong, including sex in Christian marriages.¹

Another prominent reason they were confused was that in the Roman Empire there was no uniform way of getting married. In fact, there were four distinct kinds of “marriages” in the 1st Century. The first was tent companionship. The basic idea here was that slave owners would arrange marriages for their slaves. It’s estimated that there were several hundred thousand slaves in the Roman Empire at this time, with many having become Christians. There was a need to know whether the marriage was legitimate or not.

Another type of marriage was between common people and known as common-law marriage. This type of “marriage” was based on the fact that the “husband and wife” had lived together for more than a year, which was seen by the government as a legitimate marriage. The church wanted to know whether or not these people should be considered married.

A third kind of marriage was the arranged marriage or “marriage for sale!” This was more like a business deal than a real marriage. The father would basically sell his daughter to the highest bidder, which “won” the right

¹ Asceticism – Greek *askētikos* **1**: practicing strict self-denial as a measure of personal and especially spiritual discipline.
<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Asceticism>

to enter into a marriage agreement regardless of the age of the daughter. Again, the church wanted to know if this was a legitimate form of marriage or not.

Finally, the form of marriage that we're most familiar with is the traditional marriage, which was a practice of the nobility in the Roman Empire. These weddings were very sophisticated and included a ceremony, which included exchanging rings, bridal veils, wedding cake, the holding of right hands and music. It's easy to see where the American wedding ceremony comes from. However, a Christian ceremony today is distinctly different because it includes Scripture and serious and sacred vows made before God and witnesses.

Considering the different aspects of the four types of marriage, it's easy to see why there was confusion about who was really married and who wasn't. Other concerns included: 1. If you're really married, is sex okay? 2. If you got married under one of the "wrong ways," should you get a divorce? 3. If you're a Christian now and your spouse isn't, is that a reason to get divorced? 4. If you're not married, should you just stay single and celibate?

In this study we'll see that God's Word validates singleness, advocates marriage, celebrates sex, and regulates divorce.

God's Word Validates Singleness

1. In **1 Corinthians 7:1** Paul says, "*It is good for a man not to marry,*" which sounds like he's discouraging marriage.
2. Notice the Scripture says it's "*good*" not "*better,*" which indicates that it's okay if you aren't married.
3. In our culture there is often too much pressure applied to those who are of a certain age and are unmarried.
4. There are some singles who want to be single and there are some singles who want to be married, which brings up this classic piece of advice: "It's better to be single and want to be married than to be married and want to be single!"
5. Christian single adults should take their time and seek the Lord's will concerning marriage.
6. **1 Corinthians 7:27–28** says, "*Are you married? Do not seek a divorce. Are you unmarried? Do not look for a wife. But if you do marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned. But those who marry will face many troubles in this life, and I want to spare you this.*"
7. There are advantages to being single including:
 - a. You are spared trouble that naturally comes with marriage!
 - b. You can be more devoted to God's work. (**1 Corinthians 7:32–35**)
8. There are a few critical "rules for singleness" that Christians need to consider.

- a. **1 Corinthians 7:1** says, “*not to marry,*” which in the KJV is translated: “*not to touch a woman.*”
 - i. The Greek word is *haptomai*, which means to “kindle or light a fire” or literally, “to arouse” a woman.
 - ii. The question Christian teens and single adults have asked is, “How far is too far?” The answer is simple – “Anything that arouses is too far!”
 - iii. **1 Corinthians 7:8–9** says, “*Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I am. But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion.*”

God’s Word Advocates Marriage

9. Paul writes as an advocate of Christian marriage, as long as it’s monogamous and heterosexual, which are non-negotiable.
10. In **Matthew 19:4–6** Jesus quoted **Genesis 2:24**, and affirmed God’s perspective on marriage.
 - a. “*Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.*”

God’s Word Celebrates Sex

11. When Christians are married they give up their exclusive right to themselves, including their bodies.
 - a. **1 Corinthians 7:4–5** – “*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.*”
 - b. The KJV indicates in **1 Corinthians 7:3** that a husband “*should render due benevolence to his wife.*”
12. The goal in a Christian marriage should be how to please the other person.

God’s Word Regulates Divorce

13. **1 Corinthians 7:10–16** – “*To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife. To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord): If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. But if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A*

believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace. How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?"

- a. NOTE: It's important to understand that when Paul says, "[N]ot I, but the Lord," he means that Jesus addressed the matter specifically. When he says, "I, not the Lord," he means that Jesus didn't specifically address this, but by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he's giving instruction to believers.
14. Separation may be necessary at times, not for the purpose of leading to a divorce – which seems to be a natural progression in the mind of many people in our culture – but for the purpose of leading to reconciliation.
 15. Paul instructs Christians who have an unbelieving spouse not to seek a divorce.
 - a. Christians are released from their marriage vows when the unbeliever decides to leave the marriage.
 - b. Christians are also released when the spouse dies. ([1 Corinthians 7:39](#))
 - c. Paul urges the Christians to take into consideration the possibility that the unbelieving spouse might come to faith because of the influence of the believer in the marriage, not to mention the Christian influence on their children.

Discussion Questions

1. Review the introduction to the study guide with your group to provide the appropriate background.
2. Read [1 Corinthians 7:1–16](#) to provide an overview for this study.
3. If your group includes singles, spend time talking about what Paul has to say about being single and being married.
 - a. Read and discuss [1 Corinthians 7:27–28](#).
 - b. Spend time talking about the guideline for personal conduct regarding “How far is too far?” (See 8a above)
4. Do you know people who are experiencing difficult days because they are “married and want to be single”?
 - a. Do you think most Christian single adults have a complete understanding of what it means to be married?
 - b. What is your opinion on the lack of or the quality of premarital counseling in most churches?
 - c. Do you think there will come a time when the incidence of divorce among Christians will decrease well below the current statistics, which indicate there is really no marked difference between Christians and those outside the church?
5. Read and discuss [1 Corinthians 7:32–35](#).

- a. Spend time talking about the life and ministry of Christians you know who believe they've been called to be single.
6. If your group includes adults with young adult children, spend time talking about the need to pray for them and provide godly counsel as they try to sense the call of God in their lives regarding marriage or singleness.
 7. Our culture is obviously undergoing a major assault on the basic understanding that marriage should be between one man and one woman.
 - a. Spend time talking about some of the ways Christians can have a positive influence in their sphere of influence.
 8. Does it seem odd to you that Paul would write about the celebration of physical intimacy in marriage?
 - a. Read and discuss [1 Corinthians 7:4–5](#).
 9. In the same way our culture is unsure about what constitutes a marriage, there is also an incredibly low view of the need to see marriage as being permanent.
 - a. Use the commentary included in this study guide to provide an overview of times in which the Lord permits divorce.² (Adultery – [Matthew 5:27–32](#); [19:1–12](#) and unbelieving spouse leaves the marriage – [1 Corinthians 7:10–16](#))

² Wiersbe, W. W. (1996, c1989). *The Bible Exposition Commentary (Matthew 5:27)*. Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books.

The Seventh Commandment ([Matthew 5:27–30](#))

While Jesus did not refer to the seventh commandment in this discussion, He did quote it in the Sermon on the Mount ([Matthew 5:27–32](#)). Let's examine what He said.

Jesus and the New Testament writers affirm the authority of “Thou shalt not commit adultery” ([Exodus 20:14](#)). While the word *fornication* seems to cover many kinds of sexual sins (see [Mark 7:21](#); [Romans 1:29](#); [1 Corinthians 6:13](#)), *adultery* involves only married people. When a married person has intercourse with someone other than his or her mate, that is adultery. God has declared that it is wrong and it is sin. There are numerous warnings in the New Testament against sexual sins, including adultery ([Acts 15:20](#); [1 Corinthians 6:15–18](#); [Galatians 5:19ff](#); [Ephesians 4:17ff](#); [5:3–12](#); [Colossians 3:5](#); [1 Thessalonians 4:3–7](#); [Hebrews 13:4](#)).

This commandment affirms the sanctity of sex. God created it, God protects it, and God punishes when His law is violated. Nine of the Ten Commandments are repeated in the New Testament for us to heed. (The Sabbath commandment was given only to Israel and does not apply to the church today.) We must not think that because we are “under grace” we can flaunt God’s Law and get away with it. “Fornicators and adulterers God will judge” ([Hebrews 13:4](#), NASB).

However, Jesus went much deeper in His discussion of adultery. He showed that this can be a sin of the heart as well as a sin of the body. It is not enough simply to control the body; we must also control the inner thoughts and desires. To look at a woman *for the purpose of lusting after her* is to commit adultery in the heart. This does not mean that we cannot admire a beautiful person or picture; for it is possible to do that and not sin. It is when we look *with the intention* of satisfying lustful desires, that we commit adultery in the heart.

A sanctified sex life begins with the inner desires. Jesus singled out the eye and the hand, because seeing and feeling are usually the first steps toward sexual sin. Of course, He did not command us to perform *physical* surgery, since He was clearly dealing with the *inner* desires. He commanded us to deal drastically with sin, to remove from our lives anything that would pamper our wrong desires. We must “hunger and thirst after righteousness.”

Jesus did not alter the original Edenic Law of marriage, nor did He annul the seventh commandment. What He taught was based solidly on God's creation and God's moral law.

The Mosaic Law of Divorce (Matthew 19:7–8)

Like many people who “argue religion,” these Pharisees were not interested in discovering truth. They were interested only in defending themselves and what they believed. This was why they asked about the Jewish law of divorce recorded in [Deuteronomy 24:1–4](#).

I suggest you read this important passage in the *New American Standard Bible* to distinguish the tenses of the verbs. This translation makes it clear that Moses gave *only one commandment*: The divorced wife could not return to her first husband if she was put away by a second husband. *Moses did not command divorce*; he permitted it. He commanded that the husband give his ex-wife a legal bill of divorcement. But the wife could not return to her first husband after being remarried and divorced.

What a wise law this was. To begin with, the husband would think twice before hastily putting away his wife, since he could not get her back again. Furthermore, it would have taken time to find a scribe (not everyone could write legal documents), and during that time the two estranged people might have been reconciled. The Pharisees were interpreting Moses' Law as though it were a commandment. Jesus made it clear that Moses was only giving *permission* for divorce.

But what did Moses mean by *some uncleanness in her*? The Hebrew means “some matter of nakedness,” but this need not refer to sexual sin. That phrase is the equivalent of “some shameful thing” (see [Genesis 2:25](#); [3:7, 10](#)). It is the interpretation of this phrase that divided the two schools of Rabbi Hillel and Rabbi Shammai, famous first-century Jewish scholars. Hillel took a very lax view and said that the husband could divorce his wife for almost any reason, while Shammai took the stricter view and said Moses was speaking only about sexual sin. No matter which side Jesus took, He would surely offend somebody.

There were several laws of marriage given to the Jews, and we must examine them in order to get some perspective. For example, if a man married a woman and discovered that she was not a virgin, he could expose her sin and have her stoned ([Deuteronomy 22:13–21](#)). Of course, he had to have proof; and if he did not, he was fined and had to live with the woman all of his life. This law was as much a protection to the woman as to the man.

If a man suspected his wife of unfaithfulness, he followed the procedure outlined in [Numbers 5:11ff](#). We cannot follow that procedure today (which certainly included elements of divine judgment) since there is no priesthood or tabernacle.

Remember that the Law of Moses demanded *the death penalty* for those who committed adultery ([Leviticus 20:10](#); [Deuteronomy 22:22](#)). Our Lord's enemies appealed to this law when they tried to trap Him ([John 8:1](#)). While we have no record in the Old Testament that anyone was stoned for committing adultery, this was the divine law. The experience of Joseph ([Matthew 1:18–25](#)) indicates that the Jews used divorce rather than stoning in dealing with an adulterous wife.

Why did God command that the adulterer or adulteress be stoned to death? Certainly as an example to warn the people, for adultery undermines the very fabric of society and the home. There must be commitment in marriage, and faithfulness to each other and to God, if there is to be stability in society and in the church. God had to preserve Israel because the promised Saviour would come through that nation. God opposed divorce in Israel because it weakened the nation and threatened the birth of the Messiah (see [Malachi 2:10–16](#)).

But there was another reason for capital punishment: This left the other party free to marry again. Death breaks the marriage bond, since marriage is a physical union ([Romans 7:1–3](#)). It was important that families be continued in Israel that they might protect their inheritance ([Numbers 36](#)).

We must note one final fact before leaving this section: The divorce that Moses permitted in [Deuteronomy 24](#) *actually severed the original marriage relationship*. God permitted the woman to marry again, and her second marriage was not considered adulterous. The second man she married was called a “husband” and not an adulterer. This explains how the woman of Samaria could have had five *husbands*, and yet be living with a man not her husband ([John 4:16–18](#)). Apparently all five of those marriages had been legal and scriptural.

This means that scriptural divorce does sever the marriage relationship. *Man* cannot break this relationship by his laws, but *God can break it*. The same God who gives the laws that join people together can also give laws to put them asunder. God can do it, but man cannot.

Finally, Jesus made it clear that this Mosaic Law of divorce was a concession on God's part. God's original law of marriage left no room for divorce, but that law was laid down before man had sinned. Rather than have two people living together in constant conflict, with one or both of them seeking fulfillment elsewhere and thus commit sin, God permitted divorce. *This divorce included the right to remarriage*. The Pharisees did not ask about remarriage, for this was no problem. They accepted the fact that the parties would seek other mates, and this was allowed by Moses.

Our Lord's Law of Marriage (Matthew 19:9–12; 5:31–32)

When Jesus said "And I say unto you," He was claiming to be God; for only God can establish or alter the laws of marriage. He declared that marriage was a permanent union that could only be broken by sexual sin. The word *fornication* in the New Testament covers many kinds of sexual sins. The definition of fornication as "sexual sin between two unmarried persons" would not apply here, for Jesus was talking about married persons. Are we to believe that the 23,000 men who committed fornication under the enticement of Baalam (Numbers 25) were all unmarried men? Was the admonition of Acts 15:20, 29 sent only to single church members?

Marriage is a permanent physical union that can be broken only by a physical cause: death or sexual sin. (I would take it that homosexuality and bestiality would qualify.) Man cannot break the union, but God can. Under the Old Testament Law, the sinner was stoned to death. But the church today does not bear the sword (Romans 13:1–4). Were adultery and fornication more serious under the Law than the same sins are today? Of course not! If anything, such sins are even worse today in the light of the full revelation of God's grace and holiness that we now have in Jesus Christ.

The conclusion seems to be that divorce in the New Testament is the equivalent of death in the Old Testament: It permitted the innocent party freedom to remarry.

Notice that our Lord's new law of marriage and divorce was based on the three previous laws. From the Edenic Law He took the principle that marriage was a physical union that could only be broken by a physical cause, and that only God could permit the breaking of the union. From the seventh commandment He took the principle that sexual sin did indeed break the marriage union. From the Mosaic Law of divorce He took the principle that God could ordain divorce and effectively break the marriage union, and that the freed party could remarry and not be guilty of adultery.

Our Lord's teaching is that there is only one scriptural basis for divorce, and that is sexual sin (fornication). If two people are divorced on any other basis, and marry other mates, they are committing adultery.

Jesus did not teach that the offended mate *had* to get a divorce. Certainly there can be forgiveness, patient healing, and a restoration of the broken relationship. This would be the Christian approach to the problem. But, sad to say, because of the hardness of our hearts, it is sometimes impossible to heal the wounds and save the marriage. Divorce is the *final* option, not the first option.

Happy marriages are not accidents. They are the result of commitment, love, mutual understanding, sacrifice, and hard work. If a husband and wife are fulfilling their marriage vows, they will enjoy a growing relationship that will satisfy them and keep them true to each other. Except for the possibility of sudden temptation, no husband or wife would think of a relationship with another person, so long as their relationship at home is growing and satisfying. And the pure love of a husband or wife is a great protection against even sudden temptation.

The disciples' response to Christ's teaching showed that they disagreed with Him. "If there is no way to get out of a bad marriage, then you are better off staying single!" was their argument. Jesus did not want them to consider divorce as an "out" because then they would not have a serious attitude toward marriage.

In Matthew 19:12, Jesus made it clear that each man (and woman) must consider God's will concerning marriage. Some people should not get married because of physical or emotional problems from birth. Others should not get married because of their responsibilities in society; they have been "made eunuchs by man." An only child who must care for aged parents might be an

10. Close your time by allowing everyone in your group to: (if they're married) to affirm their commitment to their marriage vows, and to commit themselves to pray for their teens and young adult children to seek the Lord's will in their lives regarding marriage, etc.; (if they're single) to affirm their acceptance of the fact that it's the Lord's will for some to be married and some to be single, and to commit themselves to living under Scriptural guidelines for personal conduct with the opposite sex; for everyone to commit to being a positive influence in the cultural debate regarding marriage, sex, and divorce; to live out God's Word in faith, courage and obedience.

example of this category. Some, like the Apostle Paul, stay single that they might better serve the Lord ([1 Corinthians 7:7](#)).

It is fitting that our Lord's teaching about marriage should be followed by His blessing of the children for children are the happy heritage of those who are married. Jesus did not look on the children as a curse or a burden. "Two shall become one flesh" is fulfilled in the birth of children, and the love of the parents is deepened and matured as it is shared with others in the home.

The parents brought the children to Jesus that He might bless them. There is no thought here of baptism or even of salvation. Children who have not reached the age of accountability ([Isaiah 7:16](#)) are surely covered by the death of Christ ([Romans 5:17–21](#)). Children are born sinners ([Psalm 51:5](#)); but if they die before they are accountable, they are regenerated and taken to heaven ([2 Samuel 12:23](#); [Ps. 23:6](#)).

The children were certainly privileged to have Jesus take them in His arms and pray for them. Our practice of baby dedication today seeks to follow this example. How happy those children are whose parents are married in the will of God, and who are seeking to obey God, and who bring them to Jesus for His blessing.