



The Round Church at
St Andrew the Great
Cambridge

A Sermon Preached
on Sunday 17th June 2007
by Mark Ashton

10p

1 Corinthians 7:1-17

Marriage matters

For almost all my life I have lived in very comfortable circumstances. But for one brief year the circumstances of my life were quite painful: I was 5,000 miles away from my home and all my family; I was being paid £3.50 a week; I suffered from enteric dysentery for many months on end; I was lonely; I was isolated and I was painfully alienated from the culture in which I was living. Now, I was not a Christian at that time (although I think I was beginning to search for meaning in life); but I did learn a valuable lesson: because at the end of the year, I reckoned that the sum of my happiness and of my unhappiness during that year had been pretty much the same as in any previous year of my life. In other words, my happiness (or lack of it) did not depend solely upon my circumstances. And that is an important lesson in life.

Today we start a long chapter in 1 Corinthians 7, dealing with marriage and singleness, circumcision and slavery. But it has a connecting theme. In one way or another, Paul keeps saying: “Don’t try to change the circumstances of your life”. Let’s look further on at some verses: *Nevertheless, each one should retain the place in life that the Lord assigned to him and to which God has called him. This is the rule I lay down in all the churches* (v 17). *Brothers, each man, as responsible to God, should remain in the situation God called him to* (v 24). *Because of the present crisis, I think that it is good for you to remain as you are* (v 26). *In my judgment, she is happier if she stays as she is—and I think that I too have the Spirit of God* (v 40).

That is his theme: remain as you are; because life is all about making sense of my present experience. Paul is not encouraging a stoical

resignation. He is telling us to experience God right where we are at this moment. Don’t keep thinking, “If only I could change this about my life...or reach that...or finish with the other...then I will be a happier/better/holier/more complete person”. “No!” says Paul, “Find, and know, and love, and serve God now, right where you are. Don’t look to your circumstances for happiness. Look to God!”

Well, let’s see how that applies to marriage—

1) Making the most of marriage (vv 1-7)

Particularly (a) Sex in marriage. *Now for the matters you wrote about: It is good for a man not to marry. But since there is so much immorality, each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband. The husband should fulfil his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. 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. Do not deprive each other except by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. I say this as a concession, not as a command. I wish that all men were as I am. But each man has his own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that* (vv 1-7).

In chapter 6, as we saw last week, Paul explained the spiritual significance of sexual intercourse, showing there is no such thing as casual sex. Now he is addressing some points in their letter to him. *Now for the matters you wrote about: It is good for a man not to marry* (v 1). That so contradicts

the rest of Paul's teaching as a whole, and the rest of the teaching of the Bible, that I think we can safely say that the translation at the bottom of the page is much more likely: ***"It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman"*** (v 1). It's a quotation: some in Corinth were making an unhelpful division between the body and the Spirit. They thought all that really mattered was the spirit. So what you did with your body was either spiritually irrelevant (so indulge it, see chapter 6—last week), or a spiritual hindrance (so suppress it: try to do without sex altogether ***"not to have sexual relations with a woman"*** [v 1b]).

Asceticism (over-disciplining our bodies for spiritual purposes) has been common in Christian history: In the 3rd Century there was one Church leader who taught that the Holy Spirit actually left the room when a man and his wife had sex. And in the Middle Ages, Yves of Chartres forbade sex on Thursdays because of the Ascension of Jesus, on Fridays because of the Cross, on Saturdays in honour of Mary, on Sundays to celebrate the Resurrection and on Mondays out of respect for the dead. Which, presumably, meant that for many Tuesdays and Wednesdays were the highlight of the week.

But our sexual urges are enormously strong, and they are designed for marriage. ***But since there is so much immorality, each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband. The husband should fulfil his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. 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. Do not deprive each other except by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control*** (vv 2-5).

Both partners have sexual needs and it is their duty within marriage to try to meet each other's needs. Sex is not about self-gratification (that is what is essentially wrong with masturbation). It is about meeting someone else's physical needs as best I can. Notice Paul makes no reference here to the need to reproduce, to have children. This is sex for its own sake. Or at least, sex for one another's sake. Paul was ahead of his time—The Latin poet Ovid wrote that 'there could be no erotic pleasure between husband and wife, because it was a

relationship of duty'. But Paul redefines marriage as the appropriate context for the mutual satisfying of erotic desires, and not just for the procreation of legitimate heirs. It is the challenge for each partner, over time, to work at making themselves compatible to the other's needs and desires. James Dobson's advice is that if you want to improve the sex in your relationship, you need to work at improving the rest of that relationship in the other 23½ hours of the day. We cannot divorce sex from its context and expect it to be satisfying.

Do not deprive each other except by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. I say this as a concession, not as a command (vv 5-6). Sex, not prayer, should be for husband and wife the most intimate celebration of life together in Christ. A man cannot meet all his wife's needs in marriage (and it is often a disappointing [but important] stage in a marriage when you get to recognise that), but there is one need that only the husband can meet: his wife's need for sexual intercourse. Likewise for the wife—he has many needs you will never be able to meet. But he has one need only you can meet: so meet it. There is to be no withholding sexual intercourse for manipulative purposes in marriage. The married are to work at unselfish sex, and to make the most of our present married circumstances, not wishing all the time that we were climbing into bed with a George Clooney or a Brad Pitt, or a Jordan or an Angelina Jolie. Be content with where you are, and make the most of it, says Paul.

But, lest the unmarried are finding this hard to listen to, let us note what Paul wrote next: ***I wish that all men were as I am. But each man has his own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that. 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*** (vv 7-9).

2) Making the most of singleness (vv 7-9)

Paul's own preference was for singleness, and he will discuss this at greater length later in the chapter, so we will deal with it only briefly today (and deal with the Bible's teaching on the relative merits of singleness and marriage in a later

sermon). *I wish that all men were as I am. But each man has his own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that* (v 7). Paul was very happy with his own state. But he knew that this is essentially a matter between each person and God. *But each man has his own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that* (v 7b). God is in charge; and both singleness and marriage are gifts. Remember the New Testament teaches that spiritual gifts differ (we all, as believers, get different ones); they never elevate us above one another; they are for other people's benefit (not our own) to build up the fellowship of believers; and they are not permanent (I may have the gift of singleness, but later God may give me the gift of marriage. I may have the gift of marriage now, but later I may be widowed and God may give me the gift of singleness). And whatever my gift, if it is God's gift, it is for your benefit, not just for my own.

Of the half-dozen Christian leaders who have had the biggest spiritual impact on me over the 39 years of my spiritual life, four are bachelors, and the fifth only married late in life. Single people are precious in the life of the church; God can use them in special ways; and so we must care for them and value them. I am sorry if today's sermon is inevitably slanted in the direction of the married. Later in the chapter the single will come into their own (we will see then how Paul encourages you, if you are at the moment single, to make the most of the spiritual opportunities that singleness provides for you). Rejoice in God now; relate to Him as you are. Enjoy Him in the present. Don't be consumed with a longing for a change of circumstances.

Then Paul returns to the married, who are in unhappy marriages.

3) Make the most of marriage – marriage under stress (vv 10-17)

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 (vv 10-16)? Christians are not to divorce, but divorces will happen. When they do, the Christian believer must hang on to God in whatever state he or she finds him or herself. *A wife must not separate from her husband. But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband* (vv 10b-11b). It will take the grace of God to do that.

Or look at the position of the Christian married to the non-Christian: *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* (v 14).

Paul is so emphatic about the need to stay married in this chapter that one suspects there must have been a lot of pressure in Corinth to end marriages. One reason may have been that if, as Paul has said in the previous chapter, sex with a prostitute tore apart the limbs of Christ, what about sex with an unbelieving spouse? Would not that also defile the believer? Even to touch an unclean thing contaminated you with uncleanness under the Old Testament law. (Remember the Jews' dismay at the way Jesus touched lepers and approached corpses?). But, of course, Jesus had reversed that law of pollution. His touch cleansed and healed. He had put entropy into reverse. So the believer is to trust in Christ's power to heal and to save. He is the most powerful force in the universe and the unbelieving spouse, who is willing to maintain a marriage with a believer, is opening him or herself to that force. So, Believer, believe it...and act on it.

Now verse 14 does not mean the unbelieving partner is automatically saved: look at verse 16 *How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?* But as Christian parents trust and plead with God for the salvation

of their children (end of verse 14), so the Christian partner is to trust God for the eventual salvation of their unbelieving spouse. It is the challenge to trust God and to pursue the peace of the gospel.

Wherever we are, whatever state we are in, we are called to live where we are, to trust God now (not for a change of circumstances). If we think we would be more effective Christians in different circumstances, we fool ourselves.

I know these topics are painful for many of us. For some it will be the pain of involuntary singleness, for others marriage to an unbeliever, for others a divorce, a remarriage, an unhappy marriage, a sexless marriage. I do not want to minimise that pain. But I do want us to notice that Paul is not encouraging us to beat ourselves up with regret about the present, or guilt about the past. (Nor would I encourage some of us to be too desperate to prove to ourselves that we did do the right thing in the past in this area of our lives. In my experience, some of the most mature believers are those who continue to have to cope with the ongoing consequences of past disobedience, which keep them in constant humble and grateful dependence on God's grace, rather than in self-righteousness).

Now, I have ducked some issues raised by these verses. I am deliberately leaving some unanswered questions for you to pick up via Grill the Preachers (should you so wish). Others we will be returning to in later sermons...Because I want us to see the overall theme here. Paul is telling us to look, not at our circumstances, but, from our circumstances, into the face of God. Do not think you need a change of circumstances to find a change of blessing. Trust God now to act with His salvation, His peace, into our lives.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)