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GENUINE SPIRITUALITY: A STUDY OF 1 CORINTHIANS
 #18

MARRIAGE AND SINGLENES
 [PART 1]
 1 CORINTHIANS 7:1-16

INTRODUCTION

The believers in Corinth were an immature bunch [1 Corinthians 3:1-3]. Aspects of their immaturity were orally reported to Paul and to this report he responds in 1 Corinthians 1:10 – 6:20. Additionally, Paul received a letter containing numerous questions from this church he founded. This letter contained the church's responses to Paul's previous instructions, probably given in an earlier letter the Apostle wrote to them [1 Corinthians 5:9]. In essence, this letter Paul received voiced the church's disagreements with his theological positions. Therefore, Paul now writes to instruct them on the specific issues where they took exception to his instructions.

Apparently, one such issue where Paul and the church disagreed concerned marriage and singleness. At least some of the Corinthians were very confused about sex and marriage in the life of one who follows Jesus. Some of the Corinthians were involved in sexual immorality with prostitutes [1 Corinthians 12-20]. Others simply cast off the idea that sex and marriage are good gifts from the Lord. These Corinthians held a view that singleness was more holy than marriage and that celibacy was more spiritual than physical intimacy. Essentially, this theological position taught that Christians should not need such aspects of creation as marriage and sex. Paul must refute this asceticism and offer them a biblical understanding of marriage and singleness.

1. GENERAL PRINCIPLES CONCERNING MARRIAGE (7:1-6)

(1.1) God's plan for most people involves marriage (vv1-2)

In verse 1, we encounter another Corinthian theological slogan, *it is good for a man not to touch a woman*. These are not Paul's words; these words reveal the unbiblical asceticism within the Corinthians' congregation. In verse 2, Paul refutes their reasoning by reminding them that marriage is normally part of each man and each woman's life. Here, the Corinthians are not only advocating for singleness over marriage, but for celibacy within marriage. In short, the Corinthians thought themselves to be so spiritual that the body's desires had no place in their lives as followers of Jesus. Paul flatly refutes this idea by pointing out one huge advantage of being married; it is a defense against sexual immorality. And because sexual desires are a normal part of life, marriage should also be the norm. It would not be an overstatement to say that God created man and woman to live as couples. One of the good gifts that God has given to His people is the gift of marriage. In fact, God said to Adam that his singleness was not good (Genesis 2:18). Throughout the Scriptures, marriage is honored by God: *He who finds a wife finds a good thing And obtains favor from the LORD (Proverbs 18:22); 14House and wealth are an inheritance from fathers, But a prudent wife is from the LORD (Proverbs 19:14).*

(1.2) Marriage is good because it acts as a safeguard against immorality (v2)

When God created man, He said, *"It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him."* From the beginning, God defined His created institution of marriage as a blessed state to live within. Marriage is good for several reasons, but one obvious reason is that it provides a safeguard against immorality. Paul had already warned the Corinthians about the curse that comes with immorality [1 Corinthians 6:9-10].

(1.3) Marriage comes with obligations (vv3-6; 32-35)

If marriage is to be an adequate defense against sexual immorality, then a healthy sexual relationship must be cultivated within marriage. The Corinthians were thoroughly confused on this matter. Their immature understanding of true spirituality caused them to neglect these kinds of matters. Paul does not encourage abstinence within marriage, rather he teaches the Corinthians: (1) sexual relations are a "due" within marriage (v3) because (2) the body is not one's free possession but belongs to one's spouse (v4) [Fee]. Paul must use this language because some husbands or wives were depriving their spouses of sexual relations and Paul wants to put a stop to this (v5). To continue in that path is to leave your partner vulnerable to Satan's temptations toward immorality.

Paul does allow for times of mutual fasting within marriage for the clear purpose of devoting ourselves to prayer. This fasting must be mutual and for a time period agreeable to both individuals. But even here Paul emphasizes that he is not commanding such times, but only allowing for them (v6).

There are more than sexual obligations within marriage and Paul speaks of them later in this chapter. *32But I want you to be free from concern. One who is unmarried is concerned about the things of the Lord, how he may please the Lord; 33but one who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how he may please his wife, 34and his interests are divided. The woman who is unmarried, and the virgin, is concerned about the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and spirit; but one who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how she may please her husband. 35This I say for your own benefit; not to put a restraint upon you, but to promote what is appropriate and to secure undistracted devotion to the Lord.*

So what have we learned about marriage and sexual relations?

- (1) Sex is good within God's limits (v2). Sex is prohibited outside of marriage. That goes for premarital sex and extramarital sex.
- (2) In marriage, my spouse now has God-given authority over my body and we must use this privilege wisely (v4).
- (3) Satan uses immorality as a primary temptation to draw men and women away from God (v5).

2. GENERAL PRINCIPLES CONCERNING SINGLENESS (7:7-9)

(2.1) Singleness is the exception, not the norm (v7)

Here in verse 7, we are introduced to singleness as Paul holds himself up as an example. For himself, Paul prefers God's unique gift of celibacy. But we get the sense that Paul sees this as Jesus did; an exception to the norm. Jesus discussed this topic with His disciples in Matthew 19: *Matthew 19:10-12, 10The disciples said to Him, "If the relationship of the man with his wife is like this, it is better not to marry." 11But He said to them, "Not all men can accept this statement, but only those to whom it has been given. 12"For there are eunuchs who were born that way from their mother's womb; and*

there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men; and there are also eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. He who is able to accept this, let him accept it."

(2.2) Singleness requires a unique gift from God designed to provide freedom for serving Jesus (vv7; 32-35)

What makes a man able to accept celibacy is God's giftedness. Grace enables a single person to remain pure. And for some, God will grant them a unique grace to live celibately as they are freed to serve Jesus without distraction. *33but one who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how he may please his wife, 34and his interests are divided. The woman who is unmarried, and the virgin, is concerned about the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and spirit; but one who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how she may please her husband. 35This I say for your own benefit; not to put a restraint upon you, but to promote what is appropriate and to secure undistracted devotion to the Lord.*

(2.3) Singleness must be characterized by self-control (vv8-9)

How does a single person know if he or she has such a gift? The answer is found in verse 9, where Paul very practically says, *But if they do not have self-control, let them marry; for it is better to marry than to burn with passion.* Paul sees great benefits for celibate persons, but he sees no benefit for sinning persons. Therefore, he encourages those without this giftedness to marry rather than sin.

3. SPECIFIC INSTRUCTION TO MARRIED PERSONS (7:10-16)

(3.1) To marriages where both partners are believers (vv10-11)

Paul now applies all of this previous teaching to married couples where both partners are believers. His straightforward command; *the wife should not leave her husband and the husband should not divorce his wife.* Paul appeals to Jesus on this issue, because he knows of an occasion when Jesus spoke specifically about divorce [Matthew 19:1-12]. Jesus absolutely forbade a man from getting rid of one wife so that he could have another. Jesus called that adultery. Paul aligns himself with Jesus when he declares that Christians should not divorce.

Paul recognizes that some believers will not obey his [and Jesus'] command, so he instructs those who may get divorced not to remarry. If a wife leaves her husband and remarries, she commits adultery. Her only options are singleness or returning to her husband. Leaving is never ideal, but if one leaves he must not compile his sins by committing adultery.

(3.2) To marriages where only one partner is a believer (vv12-16)

Now Paul must address another situation in Corinth; what about believers who are married to unbelievers? Is the marriage binding? Does the unbeliever taint the believing spouse and the children? What is one to do in such confusing circumstances? Paul again speaks clearly, *12But to the rest I say, not the Lord, that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he must not divorce her. 13And a woman who has an unbelieving husband, and he consents to live with her, she must not send her husband away. Paul's reason for such commands is stated in verse 14, 14For the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her believing husband; for otherwise your children are unclean, but now they are holy.* God blesses the faithful spouse and the children of a believer have a reasonable assurance that they too are chosen and loved by God.

But if the believing spouse's faith causes such hostility in the marriage that the unbelieving partner leaves, the believer is to *let him leave*. If the unbelieving spouse leaves, the believing spouse is free from previous marital obligations (v15).

The end of verse 15 and all of verse 16 have been the source of much debate. What does Paul mean here? It is difficult to conclusively know the answer. But we can be certain that Paul encourages believers to remain married to unbelievers in hopes that God will save the unbelieving spouse. It is not by accident that he or she is now married to a follower of Jesus. Perhaps this is God's providential means of bringing that one to Himself.

CONCLUSION

Both marriage and celibacy are good gifts from a good and wise God. What is at stake in our properly understanding this? The ultimate answer is the glory of Jesus in the world. Marriage is designed by God to be a living illustration of Christ's love for His Church; *25Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, 26so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, 27that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless (Ephesians 5:25-27)*. How a husband cares for his wife is a living illustration of how Jesus cares for His bride, the church. How a wife submits to her husband is a living illustration of how the church should submit to Jesus, her Bridegroom. What does your marriage convey to the world about Jesus and His bride?