

## 1 Corinthians 7:1

### Relationships Sex and Singleness

**Introduction:** We cannot talk about Relationships without understanding the basic principle of the biblical sexual ethic. Sex is truly what drives so much of our western thinking especially about singleness, friendship, marriage, and family. We live in an absolutely sex obsessed society. Sex is everywhere. From the tabloids, to news media, to marketing and sales (Sometimes one wonders what cars, or toothpaste, or a number of these things have to do with sex..), to entertainment, -music, art, film; to politics, to education.. it's everywhere. And since we're such a sexualized culture each of us has been radically influenced in ways we probably aren't even aware of. Now as I said last week, Christians believe that God created everyone and everything, including sex, and that God has a design and a purpose for everyone and everything. So we as Christians need to know what the Bible teaches about relationships and sex and it's purpose so we can make wise and informed decisions about our lives and our relationships.

Paul, writing to the Corinthians speaks to them about "the goodness of singleness" (we'll elaborate more on "goodness" next week) Other translations say, "**It is good for a man not to touch a woman.**" or "**Yes, it is good to live a celibate life.**" The word "good" here means expedient or profitable.

What Paul is saying here is that the life of singleness is Good. This was totally contrary to the views of the day which prized the family, the tribe over the individual. When Paul and the scriptures talk about singleness or celibacy it doesn't mean simply not married but it also means not sexually active in any way -we used to use the word chastity to describe this way of life. Remember the Bible sees all forms of sex and sexual expression outside of marriage between one man and one woman as sinful.

**Simultaneously, the Bible heartily celebrates the goodness of sex within the confines of marriage.** So the question is why does God confine sexual activity exclusively to married couples? What is it's purpose? How should we think about sex?

## **1. Common Views on Sex**

### **1. Sexual Realism: Sex as natural appetite.**

1. Many of the ancient Greeks and Romans viewed sex as similar to any other bodily activity, such as eating or sleeping. When you felt like doing it, you should do it—just be careful not to overdo it, as with all appetites. This modern view of sex has been called “realism.” Realists claim to be neutral about sex; they see it as just one human activity among many, but one that must be demystified. Their message, prominent in today’s public school sex education, is that we should understand the natural biological drive of sex, realize that if we are not careful sexual activity can have negative consequences, master it like any other skill, and be responsible.

### **2. Sexual Platonism: Sex as animal passion.**

1. One of the most influential branches of Hellenistic philosophy viewed the spirit as the highest good and the body as “lesser.” That is, the lower, physical, “animal” nature was seen as chaotic and dark, and the higher, more rational, “spiritual” nature was seen as civilized and noble. This led to viewing sex as a degrading, dirty thing, a necessary evil for the propagation of the human race. Premarital sex was forbidden because sex in general was dirty and was allowable only for the higher good of having children and building up the family name. Unfortunately, this view took root in many places in the Christian church. Truly spiritual people should refrain from sex, sex is allowable only if you are trying to have children, sexual pleasure is not appropriate for high- minded people—these notions grew out of a kind of sexual platonism.

### **3. Sexual Romanticism: Sex as repressed creativity.**

1. While Hellenism located the source of evil in the physical, the Romantics located it in the cultural. They thought that human beings in their unspoiled original state were brimming with natural goodness and creativity; it was society that stifled it. Goodness would be achieved by liberating the basic, primal instincts, which were in themselves pure. Opposed to Romanticism was

Victorianism, the assumption that goodness could be achieved only by suppressing the primal instincts, which in themselves were evil.

2. While the first perspective sees sex as an inevitable biological drive and the second view sees it as a necessary evil, the last view sees sex as a critical way of self-expression, a way to “be yourself” or “find yourself.” For biological realists, all sex is right if it’s safe. For Platonists, the flesh inhibits the spirit, so sex is naturally tainted in some way. For romantics, the quality of interpersonal love is the primary touchstone that makes sex right or wrong.

#### **4. THE CHRISTIAN VIEW**

1. The Christian attitude toward sex is popularly thought to be the Platonist view, but most definitely it is not. It differs radically from each of these three prominent views.
  1. Contrary to the Platonist view, the Bible teaches that sex is very good (Gen. 1:31). God would not create and command something to be done in marriage (1 Cor. 7:3–5) that was not good. The Song of Solomon is filled with barefaced rejoicing in sexual pleasure. In fact, the Bible can be very uncomfortable for the prudish.
  2. Contrary to the realist “sex-as-appetite” view, the Bible teaches that sexual desires are broken and usually idolatrous. All by themselves, sexual appetites are not a safe guide, and we are instructed to flee our lusts (1 Cor. 6:18). Our sexual appetite does not operate the same as our other appetites.
  3. C. S. Lewis makes this clear when he asks us to imagine a planet where people pay money to watch someone eat a mutton chop, where people ogle magazine pictures of food. If we landed on such a planet, we would think that the appetite of these people was seriously deranged. Yet that is just how modern people approach sex.
2. Contrary to the romantic view, the Bible teaches that love and sex are not primary for individual happiness. What the Bible says about sex and marriage “has a singularly foreign sound for those of us brought up on romantic notions of marriage and sex. We are

struck by the stark realism of the Pauline recommendations in 1 Corinthians 7 . . . but [most of all by] the early church's legitimation of singleness as a form of life [which] symbolized the necessity of the church to grow through witness and conversion.”  
- Stanley Hauerwas

3. The Bible views sex not primarily as self-fulfillment but as a way to know Christ and build his kingdom. That view undercuts both the traditional society's idolatry of sex-for-social standing and the secular society's idolatry of sex-for-personal-fulfillment.

## 2. Sex is Holy

1. What?! The word “holy” means to be set aside for a distinct purpose. As I said, Christianity has a very lofty view of sex that we must understand to make sense of the Christian sexual ethic. Sex is holy for three reasons:

### 1. Sex Procreates: The Politics of Sex

1. Sex is sacred because, with God, it co-creates a new soul. Sex propagates the human race (Gen. 1:28). Its purpose is not merely for the building up of a family name. The purpose of sex is to create families of disciples, to establish new kingdom communities. And, ironically, the main way we learn this is through the Bible's remarkable attitude toward singleness.
2. Christianity, unlike most traditional religions or cultures, holds out singleness as a viable way of life. Both Jesus and the apostle Paul were single. Jesus spoke about those who remained unmarried in order to better serve the kingdom of God (Matt. 19:12). Paul says singleness is often better for ministering as a sign of the coming kingdom (1 Cor. 7:29–35). Christianity differed from Judaism radically in its idea of singleness as the paradigm way of life for its followers. . . . “
  1. Singleness was legitimate, not because sex was thought to be a particularly questionable activity, but because the mission of the church was such that “between the times” the church required those who were capable of complete service to the Kingdom. . . . And we must remember that the “sacrifice” made by the single is not that of “giving up sex,” but the much more significant sacrifice of giving up heirs.

There can be no more radical act than this, as it is the clearest institutional expression that one's future is not guaranteed by the family, but by the church. - Stanley Hauerwas

3. Therefore, Christians are to choose between marriage and singleness not on the basis of whether we want the personal happiness and status of a family but on the basis of which state makes us most useful in the kingdom of God. Both singleness and marriage are necessary symbolic institutions for the constitution of the church's life as the historic institution that witnesses to God's kingdom. Neither can be valid without the other. If singleness is a symbol of the church's confidence in God's power to effect lives for the growth of the church, marriage and procreation is the symbol of the church's understanding that the struggle will be long and arduous. For Christians do not place their hope in their children, but rather their children are a sign of their hope . . . that God has not abandoned this world.
4. See, then, how different the Christian prohibition of extramarital sex is from the traditional one? In traditional cultures premarital sex was taboo but so was singleness, because the family and the propagation of its economic and social status were idols. The Christian prohibition of premarital sex is clearly different in its inspiration, because singleness is now considered a viable alternative. In traditional societies premarital sex was forbidden because it undermined the family. In Christianity it undermined the kingdom.
5. **Why?**
6. First, sex outside of a marriage covenant undermines the character quality of faithfulness, which builds community. Chastity, we forget, is not a state but a form of the virtue of faithfulness that is necessary for a role in the community. As such, it is as crucial to the married life as it is to the single life.
7. Second, we abstain from extramarital sex in order to witness how God works in the gospel. God calls his people into an

exclusive relationship, a marriage covenant, and to give him anything less in return is unfaithfulness.

1. “By our faithfulness to one another, within a community that requires, finally, loyalty to God, we experience and witness to the first fruits of the new creation. Our commitment to exclusive relations witnesses to God’s pledge to his people, Israel and the church that, through his exclusive commitment to them . . . people will be brought into his kingdom.” -Stanley Hauerwas
2. So although it is common to hear people say, “Sex is a private affair and no one’s business but my own,” it is not true. How we use sex has significant community and political ramifications.

## **2. Sex Delights: The Dance of Sex**

1. Further, sex is sacred because it is the analogy of the joyous self-giving and pleasure of love within the life of the Trinity. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit live in a relationship of glorious commitment to each other, pouring love and joy into one another continually (cf. John 1:18; 17:5, 21, 24-25). Sex between a man and a woman points to the love between the Father and the Son, as well as that between Christ and the believer (1 Cor. 11:3). Despite 1 Corinthians 7, which explodes the romanticist views of sex as strictly personal fulfillment, the Bible rather baldly and openly celebrates the delights of sex. Sex is supposed to be wonderful because it mirrors the joy of relationship in the Trinity (self-giving love) and because it points to the eternal ecstasy of soul that we will have in the new heaven and new earth in our loving relationships with God and one another (Prov. 5:18–20; Deut. 24:5).
1. “The role of the woman throughout the Song [of Solomon] is truly astounding, especially in light of its ancient origins. It is the woman, not the man, who is the dominant voice throughout the poems that make up the Song. She is the one who seeks, pursues, initiates. [In Song 5:10–16] she boldly exclaims her physical attraction. . . . Most English translations hesitate in this verse. The Hebrew is quite

erotic, and most translators cannot bring themselves to bring out the obvious meaning. . . . This again is a prelude to their lovemaking. There is no shy, shamed, mechanical movement under the sheets. Rather, the two stand before each other, aroused, feeling no shame, but only joy in each other's sexuality." - Tremper Longman III

2. Sex is, then, an important part of what Lewis calls the "great dance." According to Lewis, all of God's reality— from the stars and solar systems to the act of sexual intercourse—form an ongoing, dynamic dance, in which "plans without number interlock, and each movement becomes in its season the breaking into flower of the whole design to which all else had been directed."
- 3. Sex Unifies: The Ceremony of Sex**
1. Third, sex is sacred because it constitutes a covenant renewal ceremony. The original purpose of sex was to "become one flesh," meaning a complete personal union. Sex creates deep intimacy, oneness, and communion between two people (Gen. 2:24; 4:14). In the Bible oneness is not simply a matter of emotion but is always the creation of a covenant.
  2. Romanticism considers emotional happiness to be the main condition for marriage; if there is interpersonal happiness, sex is warranted, and then comes marriage. But when love dies, it is also allowable to walk away from the marriage. In the biblical view, however, the main condition of marriage is a binding covenant. In the romantic view, sex is self-expression; in the biblical view, sex is self-giving.
  3. The Bible is full of covenant renewal ceremonies. When God enters into a personal relationship with someone, he is not so unrealistic as to think that mere emotion can serve as the basis for it. He knows that human emotions come and go and that there needs to be something binding to provide consistency and endurance. So God requires a binding, public, legal covenant as the infrastructure for intimacy. It is far easier to be vulnerable to someone who has bindingly promised to be

exclusively faithful to you than to someone who is under no obligation to stay with you for more than one night.

4. Thus God demands covenants. But even that is not enough. He regularly gets his people together to reread the terms of the covenant, remember the history of his acts of grace in their lives, and recommit themselves through renewal of the covenant. The ultimate covenant renewal ceremony is the Lord's Supper.
  1. "The sacrament of the Lord's Supper renews the covenant made at baptism; through the breaking of bread and the pouring out of wine it reenacts the selfless sacrifice of Jesus to us. In addition, in the receiving and eating of the sacrament it reenacts the giving of ourselves to Jesus. We reenact the total commitment and oneness we have in Christ as a way of renewing and deepening that oneness." - Tim Keller
5. In the same way, marriage is a covenant, one that creates a place of security for vulnerability. But though covenant is necessary for sex, sex is also necessary for covenant. The covenant will grow stale unless we continually revisit and reenact it. Sex is a covenant renewal ceremony for marriage, the physical reenactment of the inseparable oneness in all other areas—economic, legal, personal, psychological—created by the marriage covenant. Sex renews and revitalizes the marriage covenant.
4. It's easy for modern people to find the Christian view of sex to be repressive. In actuality, evidence exists to prove that the sexual appetite is shaped significantly by the external forces of media, peer pressure, and cultural values.
5. Sex only works in the fullest way God intended for one man and one woman within the exclusive, permanent, legal commitment of marriage. Put another way: sex is a God-invented way to say to another person, "I belong completely and exclusively and permanently to you." That cannot be said outside the permanent, exclusive covenantal commitment of marriage. The modern sexual revolution finds this rule so unrealistic as to be ludicrous,

even harmful and psychologically unhealthy. Yet despite the objections of modern people, this has been the unquestioned, uniform view and law of not only one but all the Christian churches (Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant) and of Jewish, Muslim, and most older pagan morality as well.

## **Conclusion: A NEW SEXUAL ETHIC**

How we handle our sexual life can either affirm or contradict what we believe about God. God gave himself to us unconditionally in Christ, and he calls us to give ourselves unconditionally to him. God does not offer or ask for intimacy without complete whole-life commitment. If you demand intimacy yet keep control of your life, you are a living contradiction of both the way God relates to you and the way we are to relate to each other in the Christian community.

### **1. First Need: Spousal Love of Jesus**

1. Sex is for fully committed relationships because it is to be a foretaste of the joy that comes from being in complete union with God. To be honest I often feel the way that we talk about marriage and sex within the Church truly makes anyone who struggles with same sex attraction or is single, or even struggling in their marriage feel like God has dealt them a serving of leftovers or second best. Because of this we make common missteps:
  1. **If I don't have sex I'll die.** - not true. Many virgins have lived very long, very full lives.
  2. **If I don't have sex I'll never have intimacy with another human being.** -King David said that the friendship that he had with Jonathan was better than the Love of woman - could it be that David and Jonathan had such an intimate bond that it was more meaningful and powerful than anything David did in bed with any of the wives he had? God offers you intimacy in deep friendships, and other rich, powerful human relationships. Seek intimacy where God has provided it.
  3. **If I don't find a spouse and have children I will never be or have a family.** - God offers us in Christ all the love and **security** we will ever need, practically found in his church. Not only that, but in the Kingdom there will be no marriage except God's eternal covenant with his people, and no family except the family of God, made up of every tribe, tongue, nation, and people.
  4. **If I don't find "my other half" -I'll forever be half a person.** That's not true. It's not half and half make one; it's one and one make one. Besides -The gospel says that only Jesus can make you a whole person, not another sinful human being like yourself.

5. **Your singleness does not mean you are a second class citizen of the Kingdom of God.** (Matt 22:23-33) All earthly marriages will come to an end one day whether by death or in the ushering in of the kingdom of God.
  6. **Your singleness does not mean that you are in a holding pattern waiting for your coming of age or until you are more holy** - God has already bestowed his love and grace upon you in Jesus, he has given you his Holy Spirit for your blessing and sanctification, and as a **guarantee** that you are his and he will finish the work he began in you...
  7. **Your singleness or relationship status is not an indication of God's love and care for you.** - God proves his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for the ungodly
2. The most rapturous love between a man and woman is only a hint of God's love for us (Rom. 7:1-6; Eph. 5:21-33). On the one hand, this analogy anticipates the joy of meeting God face to face. But on the other hand, we realize that sex cannot completely fill the cosmic need our souls seek and that only the beatific vision will bring our loneliness to an end. Sex and marriage are great but they are only penultimate. God and his love alone are the ultimate.
    1. We human beings are made as relational creatures in the image of God, who is love. Above all, we are made to relate to him and, without that relationship, we will always experience emptiness within. People have tried to fill that vacuum with money, pleasure and achievements but nothing else fits. Not even human relationships, however good they may be, can bring complete fulfillment; only Jesus Christ can ultimately satisfy the hunger of our hearts.
    2. As Augustine so wisely said, "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you."
  3. Paul is realistic that not everyone has the "gift" of lifelong celibacy, but everyone is called to celibacy at some point, and many are called to do so even in marriage itself for various reasons, such as illness, pregnancy, or temporary separation. We can learn to handle celibacy from both a negative and a positive perspective:
    1. We need to realize that much of our "burning" comes from being brain washed by the romanticist and realist views of the world, which make an idol of sex. We can then deal with it like any other idol. We can remind ourselves that sex as a god will never deliver on its promises; it will let us down.

2. Positively, we are called to experience the spousal love of Jesus. Our singular focus means we are more available for prayer and have greater flexibility for service. Single people are often unaware that they have greater flexibility and freedom with their time and therefore have a greater opportunity for a rich and meaningful prayer life.

## **2. Second Need: A Community Practicing a New Sex Ethic**

1. It is typical for Christians to think of sexual ethics in purely individualistic terms, but that is not the right way to read the Scripture. For example, 1 Corinthians 6:9–10 reads, “Do not be deceived: neither fornicators nor idolaters nor adulterers nor homosexuals nor greedy nor slanderers . . . will inherit the kingdom of God. But you were washed, sanctified, justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.”
2. Richard Hays, in his First Corinthians commentary, responds: First Corinthians 6:9–11 has provided the launching pad for countless moralistic sermons that decry the types of sinners listed here. In fact . . . the concern of the passage as a whole is . . . to call the Corinthians to act as a community . . . and to assert the transformed identity of the baptized. . . .
3. The Corinthians are to stop seeing themselves as participants in the “normal” social and economic structures of their city and to imagine themselves instead as members of the eschatological people of God, acting corporately in a way that will prefigure and proclaim the kingdom of God. . . . [Paul] is seeking to re-socialize them into a new way of doing business, a new community consciousness.
4. Paul is calling the church not just to individual moral behavior but to be a kingdom community in which the world’s values do not hold. We will fall prey to the world’s views of sex unless we create a community, an alternative city. In this alternative city, singles enjoy their kingdom mission and practice sexual abstinence joyfully. They live in community with Christian families, who do not make an idol out of family or make singles feel abnormal. One of the reasons it is hard to practice the discipline of sex-free romantic involvement is that we don’t have a sufficiently large community of people creating this alternative city. A New sexual ethic is a church wide community effort fueled only by the love and acceptance we already have in Christ.