

## **Sexual Desire in the Christian Life**

### **1 Corinthians 7:1-9**

Mature Content Alert... Small children may have lots of questions after this one!

We are studying 1 Corinthians and today we start a new section of the book. Up to this point Paul has been writing about problems he's heard about among the Christians in Corinth, but from here on out he writes about problems they had written to ask him about. Today we're going to deal with the first problem and it has to do with sexual desire in the Christian life.

Our society has really gone crazy when it comes to how we're responding to sexual desire and it seems like it's getting worse. We have a hyper-sexualized culture that puts pressure on everyone to pursue sexual gratification in some way. There's pressure to become sexually active at a very early age, to have multiple partners and experiences, and to experiment with different people. It's primarily pressure to pursue sexual gratification with people of the opposite sex, but in the past 15 years there's been a lot of pressure to pursue gratification with the same sex. The attitude is that if you don't have strong sexual desire for the opposite sex, you should try going the other way and see what happens.

There's lots of pressure to go one way or the other or maybe something in between. It's a huge confusing mess and I especially feel sorry for our kids and young adults who have to deal with it, though it's an issue for everyone. The whole thing veers away from what God wants and what God designed, and I believe it's sending all kinds of people in directions that will end up being painful and destructive and far less fulfilling than if they'd follow God's way.

But what is God's way? I'm guessing that we have some ideas, but I also think we have some misconceptions and faulty ideas. Our passage for today is very unique. You probably won't hear very many sermons that cover the topic of sexual desire, but that's the focus of our passage for today.

The city of Corinth was much like our society. It was extremely sexualized because sex was engrained in their religion. They had a major temple to Aphrodite, who was the goddess of fertility, and in that temple there were 1,000 temple prostitutes ready to receive citizens for worship. Prostitution and sex were

prevalent and there were graphic carvings and images all over. Sex was in your face and because of that, for most people, it was constantly awakening their sexual desires. I expect there was a lot of sexual abuse of many kinds and a booming business of sex-trafficking. A lot of people would have lived through sexually traumatic experiences and been deeply wounded.

People's feelings, attitudes and beliefs about sex were all over the place. So part of Paul's teaching among them was to help them see what God's will and plan was when it came to sex and sexual desire.

One issue in particular, was that there were some in the church who, because sex was so closely associated with such sinful and painful practices, felt that it was generally base, fleshly, and sinful, therefore, in order to be most faithful, a Christian should not have sex. They should be celibate and single. And apparently there were many in the church who were pursuing singleness and celibacy in the midst of that hyper-sexualized culture.

This must have caused some confusion and conflict in the church because they ended up writing Paul a letter and asking him what he thought about the subject. So the first 9 verses of 1 Corinthians 7 contain Paul's response. These verses give us a biblical perspective on sexual desire for the Christian life that I'm guessing most of us haven't fully understood before. So please listen carefully!

Read 1 Corinthians 7:1.

*Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman."*

I read two different interpretations of this verse. Some think Paul was telling them that it was good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman. Others think that Paul was just quoting what they were saying in their letter to him. That's what I think is happening here. I think he's quoting what they wrote and what they were thinking and then follows it up with what he thinks.

Again, what they were thinking had very much to do with the hyper-sexualized, pagan culture they were living in where sex was associated with all kinds of evil practices and pain. It would make sense that they would think Christians should

not have sex and pursue celibacy instead. But now, what does Paul think? Keep in mind that Paul is a single man – never married.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:2.

*But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband.*

So Paul disagrees with what they were thinking. If you live in a hyper-sexualized culture, where sex is constantly in front of your face and sexual desires are constantly being aroused, it's not a good idea for everyone to pursue a life of singleness and celibacy.

Think of going grocery shopping... When is the worst time to go grocery shopping?... When you have an empty stomach! If you walk into a grocery store hungry, everything is going to look appealing and you're going to probably buy a bunch of food that you don't really need. The temptation is just too much. It's not a good idea to go grocery shopping when you're hungry.

Similarly, if you live in a culture that resembles an adult bookstore it's not a good idea for everyone to pursue celibacy. You're setting yourself up for misery and failure. You're going to burn with sexual passion and in your efforts to abstain from sex, the only thing you're going to be able to think about is sex. You're going to be miserable and you're going to fail.

What's God's solution to dealing with awakened sexual desires in a hyper-sexualized culture? It's not celibacy, and it's not sexual freedom and indulgence, like was happening in Corinth and what's happening in our society today. God knows how painful and destructive that will become. It ruins people's lives. It controls people. It produces a wake of victims of sexual abuse.

God has given humanity a perfect solution and that's marriage. So Paul says, "Since you're swimming in sexual temptation everyday, guys, you should go find a wife, and gals, you should go find a husband." He encourages them to get married. Marriage has become an afterthought in our society today. Sexual gratification of any kind comes first, and then if you eventually want to marry one of your sexual partners, you can if you want to. That's not God's will at all.

God designed marriage to be the solid and safe foundation in which sex can be fully enjoyed by a husband and wife. That's where he wants us to fulfill our sexual desires. Not in the temple with a prostitute. Not in a hotel. Not with a hook up. Not with a boyfriend or girlfriend. Not on the internet with a video. But in the marriage bed with your husband or wife. God's a big fan of sex. He created it for our good and for our enjoyment. He created it to magnify the union between Christ and the Church. It isn't just about making babies. It's about pleasure and the glory of God. There's nothing bad or sinful about it. God wants husbands and wives to enjoy a healthy sexual relationship within the protection of a covenant marriage.

So when you live in a society with a whole bunch of sexual temptation and you have to deal with a bunch of sexual desire, the goal for most of us to pursue is a Christ-honoring marriage.

Now, if a Christian seeks to be faithful to God in this area by carefully pursuing marriage and devoting himself or herself to their spouse, there's something that needs to happen in that marriage in order for God's plan to work. What needs to happen is sex, and lots of it, and that's where Paul goes next.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:3-5.

*<sup>3</sup> The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. <sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> 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.*

In order for God's plan to work, husbands and wives need to pursue a healthy sexual relationship in their marriage. Paul considers it both the husband's duty and the wife's duty to give their spouse the gift of sex. Paul sees God's design of marriage as two becoming one flesh. Therefore your body doesn't just belong to you anymore, it also belongs to your spouse. God has given your body to them as a gift as his way for both to satisfy sexual desire.

Now, I'd love to be able to read your minds at this point in the sermon, but I bet I already know what many of you are thinking. Husbands, you are wanting to write

these verses on a card and tape it to your bathroom mirror, or maybe on your wife's night stand. Wives, you're worried that's what he's going to do. I know I'm making generalizations and not everyone is the same, but I also know that some things are very common. The guy is rip-roaring and ready to go at a moment's notice. He wants to have sex at any point and doesn't want to wait. Very few things can deter him from his desire because that's the way God designed his body to work.

Wives on the other hand are different. There are a lot of things that can affect her mood. Wives typically need to get warmed up, they need romance, and they need an environment where they're comfortable that isn't distracting. And I believe God designed men and women this way on purpose, so that we don't just think about ourselves, but have to think about the other person. These verses are all about giving, not demanding.

So ladies, you need to pay attention to your husband's sexual desire and know that it is highly likely that he is ready to go much more often than you think he is. He doesn't want to wait a few days or a week, he's ready to go now. And if you haven't had sex for a few days, chances are he's starting to struggle. God doesn't want husbands to be celibate in their marriages. He's given you to them as a gift to enjoy, so I urge you to take this very seriously. You are their only option if they're trying to be faithful to God, but we live in a culture that doesn't care at all about that and your husbands are being tempted every day to go somewhere else to fulfill their sexual desire. Yes, they need to stand against that, but God did not create them to be able to be celibate in marriage, and you need to help them by having sex.

Now guys, this passage was not written just for our wives. We need to wake up. Do you want to have sex with your wife? Then you need to start thinking about what she needs and wants from you. She wants you to pay attention to her to show her that you love and cherish her and don't just want her for sex. She wants you to take her on dates so you can connect more deeply. She wants you to dress up and look and smell nice. It shows her that she is valuable to you. You need to make it easier for your wife to give herself to you. God didn't create your wife to be ready for sex without any effort on your part. Take care of your wife and show her you love her. She will naturally become more responsive if you make the effort to love and cherish her.

God designed sex and marriage so that both husband and wife would give themselves to each other and in so doing, receive joy and blessing. It doesn't work if one gives and the other takes. That leads to a shutdown in every area. Husbands and wives must both give of themselves to have a healthy sexual relationship that can withstand the onslaught of temptation.

Marriage is God's solution for how the people in Corinth, or us, should respond to their sexual desire. But Paul realizes that does not include everyone in the church. There's one other option. Some have been called to something else – something I think our culture and even the church doesn't pay any attention to.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:6-9.

*<sup>6</sup>Now as a concession, not a command, I say this. (referring to what he wrote earlier, that they should pursue marriage instead of celibacy) <sup>7</sup>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.*

*<sup>8</sup>To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single, as I am. <sup>9</sup>But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion.*

So Paul isn't commanding them to get married because he doesn't believe they should all get married. He wishes that all were single like him, but realizes they're not. What does he mean?

Obviously, Paul sees himself in a different place than those he's encouraging to get married. You pick up on some hints in these verses. Apparently he is able to exercise self-control with his sexual desire and he is able to remain single and celibate without burning with passion. The desire was not as strong for Paul. He could go into hyper-sexualized cities with all kinds of temptation and do just fine. He didn't need to get married. For him, celibacy and singleness was the right direction, and he sees that as a gift.

Not everyone is gifted and called to be single and celibate, but some are. And everyone who isn't married yet should take this very seriously – and parents, as you think about your kids and how to encourage them, you too need to take this

very seriously. We shouldn't pressure everyone to get married. We shouldn't treat singleness like it's abnormal. We should treat it like a gift from God.

What would our world do with someone like Paul today? What we would do is we would say, "He must be gay. If you aren't strongly attracted to women and aren't burning with sexual desire, it's probably because you're gay or bi or pan or whatever." There's pressure to have some kind of sexual attraction and the idea that God gifts some people with celibacy and singleness isn't even considered. There's so much confusion, especially among young people and my hope is that this beacon of truth can help set you free. Celibacy and singleness is wonderful if that's what God has gifted and called you to be and we need to be more ready to see it and encourage it in the church community.

God wants us to glorify Christ with our lives and when it comes to sexual desire, he's given those who burn with passion the gift of marriage. Sexual desire is wonderful, God gave it to us and he doesn't expect us to put it to death like it's sin. He wants us to get married and enjoy sex within a covenant relationship. But some of us have also been called to celibacy and singleness and to honor Christ in that way, like Paul did, and we need to elevate the importance of that in our lives and in the church. These are the gifts God has given us when it comes to sexual desire in the Christian life, and even though it may be easier to fall into the patterns of our society, they will ultimately lead to pain and destruction. God wants us to find fulfillment and joy, and he's given us these things for that to happen.

So there you go... That's the first few verses in chapter 7 and there's many more to come, but for those we have to wait until next week.