

Marriage, Singleness, and Human Flourishing for Everyone (2 Corinthians 7)

Big Idea: Flourish regardless of your marital status or sexual activity by trusting God in whatever state he's given you and finding your contentment in him.

If I had a least favorite verse in the Bible growing up, it may have been this one (in the New King James Version): "Now concerning the things of which you wrote to me: It is good for a man not to touch a woman" (1 Corinthians 7:1).

I don't have to explain why I didn't like this verse, do I? It seemed a little anti-sex and left me a bit confused.

It would have helped if I had understood that Paul is dealing with something that some of the Corinthians had said. The Corinthian culture was very hedonistic. Some members of the church were visiting prostitutes because that was socially acceptable. Married men often took mistresses as sexual partners and confidants. They didn't expect marriage to be the place for sexual fulfillment.

In response, some overreacted. They wrote to Paul and basically said, "Since sex is causing so many problems, I guess it's better not to have sex." Paul writes and says – quoting a different version:

Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman." (1 Corinthians 7:1)

In other words, it's not Paul that is arguing that sex is bad. He's responding to a church with competing beliefs: some saying that they want lots of good sex no matter how they get it, and others who saw sex as bad and something to be avoided. He's writing to a diverse church with different sexual views and practices, as well as different marital statuses. In other words, he's writing to people just like us. He's confronting two views:

- one that sex is just an appetite, and that it's perfectly natural to have sex with people when you need it, you want it;
- and the opposite view, that sex is dirty and defiling, and you should stay away from it at all costs.

He helps us see that both views are wrong, and he points us to a better way.

The question is a key one: **How do we flourish as sexual beings in a permissive culture?** And his answer couldn't be more important for us today. How do we live well as followers of Jesus in a world with a lot of options when it comes to sex, very few taboos, and competing messages, even from Christians?

Today's passage is going to help us. It's practical, realistic, and clear. It has something to say to all of us regardless of our marital and sexual status.

Here are the three main lessons.

Sex in Marriage Is Beautiful – but It's Not About You

Remember that some in Corinth thought that sexual fulfillment came not from marital sex but from sex with prostitutes, and that others thought that we'd all be better off

without sex. Paul doesn't like either view. He's neither "anything goes" nor is he a prude. Rather, he believes that sex in marriage is beautiful. It's a good option, but it's not about you.

The world gives us unlimited sexual options, but not all of those choices lead to our flourishing and freedom. Many lead to bondage, pain, and brokenness. Paul points us to God's design for our flourishing.

The place to satisfy your sexual desires is marriage. "But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband" (1 Corinthians 7:2). Paul says that married men and women have a way to avoid sexual temptation in a sexual culture: focus all of your sexual attention on your spouse. There's so much wisdom here.

If you are married, you have a place to fulfill your sexual desires. The Bible says: go for it. In fact, as we're going to see in a moment, it warns you against neglecting this part of your marital life. Hebrews 13:4 says, "Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous." If you are married, channel all your sexual energy and focus into your marriage. All of it. You will face lots of temptations to look elsewhere, but don't give in.

But we need a fuller picture. If we aren't careful, we'll start to see our partners as a means to meet our needs. Paul intends the opposite. Marriage and sex is an opportunity not to please ourselves, but to please the other and give them what they need. Listen to what he says in verses 3 to 5 in the New Living Translation:

The husband should fulfill his wife's sexual needs, and the wife should fulfill her husband's needs. The wife gives authority over her body to her husband, and the husband gives authority over his body to his wife.

Do not deprive each other of sexual relations, unless you both agree to refrain from sexual intimacy for a limited time so you can give yourselves more completely to prayer. Afterward, you should come together again so that Satan won't be able to tempt you because of your lack of self-control. (1 Corinthians 7:3-5)

Satan uses sexual desire. Your job, if you are married, is to give yourself completely to the other for *their* good. God intends your marriage to be a God-giving, self-sacrificial relationship of faithfulness and love, a relationship of mutuality and service.

Is the Bible against sex? Not at all! If you are married, pursue sexual fulfillment in marriage, figuring out how to have regular sex that is not about meeting your own desires but serving each other joyfully and sacrificially. It's a radical view of both sex and marriage that we must recover today.

If you're married, what drives your intimacy? Whose need are you most focused on? Ask God to show you more of your spouse's needs for intimacy and sex.

Before we move on, a quick word to couples who aren't married. Verse 36 says, "If anyone thinks that he is not behaving properly toward his betrothed, if his passions are strong, and it has to be, let him do as he wishes: let them marry—it is no sin." The stakes are high. Paul speaks of singles who burn with passion in verse 9. Paul could be just talking about the fires of passion. He could be talking about being consumed in judgment by sexual sin. Sex outside of marriage is not an option. The only valid options for believers are singleness with self-control or marriage.

If you are a couple and you are not yet married, it is not enough for you to have made a commitment to each other. *If you want to have sex, get married.* Paul's only condition, as he states in verse 39, is that you marry "in the Lord" – that if you are a believer, that you marry a believer.

Sex in marriage is beautiful, but that's different from sex between engaged couples or sex between committed-but-not-married couples. Sex in marriage is a gift physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. Sex in marriage is beautiful – but it's not about you.

That's the first lesson in this passage. Here's the second.

Singleness Is Not Second Best

Given what we've said up until now, you would think that everyone should get married and have lots of sex.

Actually, some should. Paul says in verses 8 and 9: "To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single, as I am. But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion." Paul advocates two options when it comes to sex: singleness with self-control or marriage. All other options are off the table.

But if you are single, it's not second best. In fact, it may even be better. Paul argues in this passage that both marriage and singleness are good. In fact, singleness gives you opportunity to serve God with greater focus than those who are married.

I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord. But the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided ... I say this for your own benefit, not to lay any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord. (1 Corinthians 7:32-35)

The words of Paul reflect God's desire for our freedom and flourishing in life. "I want you to be free from anxieties ... I say this for your own benefit..."

Getting married is good, but it comes with its own set of unique challenges and pressures, and so does singleness. Preston Sprinkle [writes](#):

Both marriage and singleness come with their own set of unique yeses and nos. I would never belittle the difficulty that comes with the distinctive nos of singleness. There are many blessings I've experienced that flow from my marriage. But if you think that marriage is the only way to say yes to life, yes to love, and yes to happiness, then you'll not only be disappointed if you get married, but you will also forgo the cruciform joy that is possible in your singleness. The gospel never promises happiness to married folk. It does promise joy for those who pick up their crosses and die with Jesus.

Singleness is not second-class. Jesus, our ultimate example, was single. For some, singleness is better because it allows greater focus to serve God. In the future, all of us will be single – or at least we will all be married to Christ. I love how Sam Allberry [puts it](#):

Like Jesus, we can live in a way that anticipates what is to come. Singleness now is a way of saying that this future reality is so certain and so good that we can embrace it now. It is a way of declaring to a world obsessed with sexual and romantic intimacy that these things are not ultimate and that in Christ we possess what is ... If marriage shows us the shape of the gospel, singleness shows us its sufficiency.

Let me repeat that. "If marriage shows us the shape of the gospel, singleness shows us its sufficiency."

He goes on to say:

This is why the church needs single people. Not as a supposedly endless source of free babysitting, but to remind us that the joy and fulfillment of marriage in this life is partial and can only be temporal. The presence of singles who find their fullest meaning and satisfaction in Christ is a visible, physical testimony to the fact that the end of all of our longing comes in Jesus.

Singleness with sexual self-control that finds its deepest needs met in Christ points each and every one of us to the sufficiency of Christ in our daily living.

Sex in marriage is beautiful, but it's not about you. Singleness isn't second best.

But there's one more lesson in this passage that's important.

Flourishing Doesn't Come From Marital Status or Sexual Fulfillment, but From God

At the end of verse 7 Paul says, "But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another." Later on, Paul says, "Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him ... So, brothers, in whatever condition each was called, there let him remain with God" (1 Corinthians 7:17, 24).

There's been a lot of discussion about what Paul means in this passage, but here's what I think he's saying: whatever your current situation right now, that is what God has called you to. Be faithful in that calling. God's grace is sufficient for you no matter what your social circumstances may be. If you're single, you can get married if you

want, but you don't need to. God's grace is enough for you just as you are. If you are married, you're still going to be sexually tempted, and you're going to face challenges in your marriage, but God's grace is sufficient for your situation too.

Both marriage and singleness are gifts. David Platt says:

I think the whole point of 1 Corinthians 7 is not really whether you're married or single but it's whether you're trusting in what God has given you at this moment. And God is saying, "Trust in me."

Margaret Clarkson, a single missionary in her 60's said, "Multitudes of single Christians of every age and circumstance have proved God's sufficiency in singleness. He has promised to meet our needs and He honors His Word. If we seek fulfillment in Him we shall find it. It may not be easy but whoever said the Christian life is easy? The badge of Christ's discipleship was a cross." And she struggled. She honestly wrestled. "Why must I live my life alone? I do not know. But Jesus Christ is the Lord of my life and I believe in the sovereignty of God and I accept my singleness from His hand. He could have ordered my life otherwise but He has not chosen to do so. As His child, I trust His love and wisdom." And not only trust but contentment—deep enjoyment of the grace of God.

In singleness, by the way, there is no need to be lonely, at least if the church is doing its job. As one single man [writes](#):

I'm not alone, because I'm part of a family of fellow believers. I'm part of the body of Christ. When I was saved, I became a member of this new spiritual family, in which we encourage one another and bear each other's burdens. Whenever I'm struggling with anything, I simply reach out to one of my broth-

ers or sisters in Christ and ask for help and prayer. I feel buoyed by the amazing group of Christians God has put in my life. I am incredibly blessed to have such an amazing body of believers at my church.

As followers of Christ, we daily choose to replace loneliness, worry, and fear with the gifts of love, presence, and community that God has given to us in this moment.

How do we flourish as sexual beings in a permissive culture? **Flourish regardless of your marital status or sexual activity by trusting God in whatever state he's given you and finding your contentment in him.**

Lord, this is easy to talk about, and challenging for each one of us to live. Thank you for Jesus who loved us and died for us and who has taken us as his bride. Thank you for whatever gift you've given us to enjoy right now: marriage or singleness. We pray for more of your Holy Spirit's transforming work in our lives so that we may find our ultimate satisfaction not in that gift but in you. In Jesus' name, Amen.