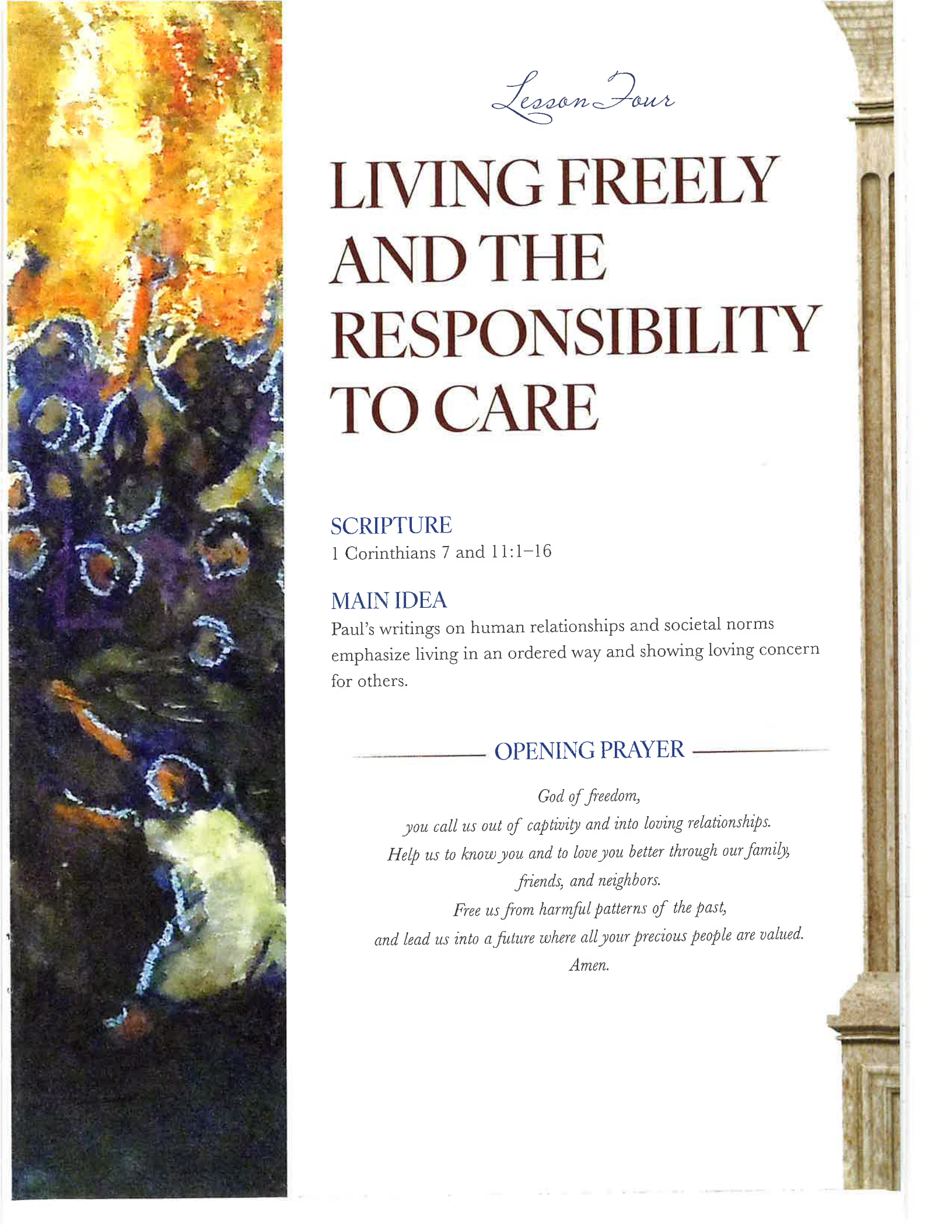




Lesson Four

LIVING FREELY AND THE RESPONSIBILITY TO CARE

SCRIPTURE

1 Corinthians 7 and 11:1-16

MAIN IDEA

Paul's writings on human relationships and societal norms emphasize living in an ordered way and showing loving concern for others.

OPENING PRAYER

*God of freedom,
you call us out of captivity and into loving relationships.
Help us to know you and to love you better through our family,
friends, and neighbors.
Free us from harmful patterns of the past,
and lead us into a future where all your precious people are valued.
Amen.*

INTRODUCTION

In Chapter 7, Paul addresses the Corinthians' questions about marriage, sexuality, and gender. Realizing not everyone is called to celibacy as he is, Paul is not critical of sexual relations as such. Rather, he wants Christians' sexual relationships to be appropriately ordered. Paul sensed that the end of the world was imminent, and this worldview informed his writings about sexuality and marriage. Still, his ethical concerns remain relevant.

Within marriage, Paul argues for partners to satisfy each other sexually. He seems to be arguing against the practice of at least some married Corinthians of abstaining from sexual relations. Paul makes a case for both husbands and wives to offer each other sexual satisfaction. He does not assume, as many people in different eras have, that men experience sexual desire more often or more strongly than women do.

In this lesson, chapter 7 is grouped with the first half of chapter 11 because the latter section also deals with gender. Specifically, it discusses how women should be attired when praying or prophesying in public worship. We will see that the apostle assumes women will do these things. The church is called to use the gifts of all its members.

LESSON

Paul notes that the Corinthians wrote him, "It is good for a man not to touch a woman" (7:1). Anyone tempted to cite that line as scripture should note: Paul quotes it only in order to make his nuanced response. For people who are called to celibacy, or who can live within its discipline, Paul agrees that sexual abstinence is good. But most people are not so called, or disciplined enough. "But because of cases of sexual immorality," Paul reasons, "each man

should have his own wife and each woman her own husband" (7:2). Paul clearly states that he wishes everyone "were as I myself am" (7:7), unmarried and celibate. But not everyone is, and marriage can be a gift too: "each has a particular gift from God, one having one kind and another a different kind" (7:7).

Paul's belief that the end of the world was near clearly influenced his thoughts about marriage. He says so in 7:26: "I think that, in view of the impending crisis, it is good for you to remain as you are." Those who are unmarried should remain so; those who are married should stay with their spouse. Speaking from his own experience, Paul privileges the single life. "I want you to be free from anxieties" (7:32), he says, and devoted to the Lord, while spouses will be "anxious" about "how to please" each other (7:33–34). As we will see in the next lesson, Paul is not saying all apostles must be celibate as he is. In 9:5, while arguing that apostles are entitled to financial support from congregations, he asserts their "right to be accompanied by a believing wife." Different people have different calls, worthy of respect.

Sexual Relations within Marriage

Paul argues that when Christians do marry, their relationship should be mutually physically satisfying. That he writes so directly about this, and that he mentions women's satisfaction first, has undoubtedly surprised, or even shocked, some Christians. "The husband should give to his wife what is due her," he teaches, "and likewise the wife to her husband" (7:3). (The New Revised Standard Version renders "what is due her" as "her conjugal rights.") As the two have become one flesh, "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” (7:4).

Attaching the word “authority” to another person’s body can make twenty-first-century people uncomfortable. It can make us think of violations like sexual assault. Christians have, at various times, condoned marital rape; the final U.S. state to remove marriage as a legal justification for rape did so only in 1993.¹ So it’s important to note that this passage is not an argument for assault. The “authority” Paul describes is part of spouses’ mutual submission to each other and to their marriage. Marriage, as Paul understands it, drawing on Jewish traditions, includes a duty to offer one’s spouse the opportunity for sexual satisfaction.²

True to his pattern of urging the Corinthians toward humility, Paul warns them against believing they can master their sexual urges by force of will. Some of them clearly believe sexual abstinence, even within marriage, is a sign of spiritual strength. That’s why they argue that “It is good for a man not to touch a woman” (7:1). Paul warns them against overestimating their willpower, and reminds them that “Satan” might “tempt” them “because of your lack of self-control” (7:5). Better to enjoy the pleasures their marriage offers and not fall prey to pride, and perhaps be tempted to adultery.

Freedom to Remarry

In his discussion of marriage, the apostle makes a noteworthy distinction between his teachings

and those of Jesus. He cites Jesus in saying that Christians should not divorce: “I give this command—not I but the Lord . . .” (7:10). But then, in addressing the question of whether believers should remain with an unbelieving spouse, he specifies that “I say—I and not the Lord” that they should not divorce over this difference. “For all you know,” Paul writes, “you might save” the unbelieving partner. If the nonbeliever leaves the Christian spouse, however, “let it be so; in such a case the brother or sister is not bound” (7:12–15).

Not being bound sounds like the believer might be free to remarry. As New Testament scholar Bruce N. Fisk notes, “Paul could have used [this verse] to issue a categorical prohibition of remarriage after desertion, but he didn’t.”³ Apparently, first-century Christians argued about remarriage after divorce just as later generations have. In this letter, we see some of the earliest examples of reasoning from Jesus’ teachings to address situations Jesus hadn’t specifically covered. That’s a practice familiar to you and me.

How does your church support people of various marital statuses? Is support made available for married couples experiencing challenges? What about accompanying members who embrace celibacy, or are seeking a partner, or have been divorced or widowed? Is there space for frank talk about both sexuality and the need for emotional support, within small groups of trusted siblings in Christ?

¹ Learn more at “Timeline of the History of Sexual Violence in the U.S.” *Tulane University All In*, allin.tulane.edu/content/timeline-history-sexual-violence-us. Accessed 7/10/2025.

² The note to 7:3 in the *Jewish Annotated New Testament* states that “Jewish tradition mandates a certain frequency of sexual intercourse according to a man’s profession; it also discusses limited periods of voluntary abstinence.”

³ Bruce N. Fisk, *First Corinthians*, Interpretation (Louisville: Geneva Press, 2000), 40.

Paul's Writing on Enslavement

Paul not only advises married or unmarried people to remain as they are. He also addresses enslavement: "Were you a slave when called [to baptism]? Do not be concerned about it" (7:21). Enslaved persons are to focus on their freedom in Christ, "just as whoever was free when called is a slave belonging to Christ" (7:22). That is, all Christians, whether **enslaved** or free, are equally free in the Lord and **equally** bound to Jesus Christ. And all, Paul believed, would imminently be reunited with Christ.

Over a millennium later, verses like these were sinfully used to justify the system of race-based chattel slavery. The misuse of Paul's words, written when he thought the world was about to end, turned some formerly enslaved African Americans against his writings. Theologian Howard Thurman remembered how his devout grandmother, who had been born into slavery and never learned to read, would have him read the Bible aloud to her. "But," he recalled, "the Pauline epistles, never—except, at long intervals, the thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians." When, as a young man, Thurman finally asked his grandmother about her choices, she replied that the man who had held her in bondage would not let a Black minister preach to the enslaved people on his property. "Always," she continued, "the white minister used as his text something from Paul. At least three or four times a year he used as a text: 'Slaves, be obedient to them that are your masters . . . as unto Christ.'⁴ Then he would go on to show how it was God's will that we were slaves and how, if we were good and happy slaves, God would bless us. I promised

my maker that if I ever learned to read and if freedom ever came, I would not read that part of the Bible."⁵

Have you encountered Christians who don't want to read Paul's writings either because of what he says, or the words that have been attributed to him, or how his words have been interpreted? Perhaps you are one of those Christians; perhaps not. Either way, how do you think about these challenges? If you could converse with Paul about the passages you or others consider problematic, what would you say to him?

No Freedom to Dominate Another

Paul's comments about slavery in First Corinthians are more equivocal than others attributed to him, like Ephesians 6:5, the verse that was used as a weapon against Howard Thurman's grandmother and millions of other enslaved people. Most biblical scholars believe Paul did not actually write the letter to the Ephesians.⁶ It's not clear that he approved of the Greco-Roman system of slavery. The Greek phrase translated as "even if you can gain your freedom, make the most of it" in the NRSVUE (1 Cor. 7:21) might be more faithfully rendered in the NIV's version, "although if you can gain your freedom, do so." In a community where enslaved and free people are both baptized into Jesus Christ, and join together in worship and fellowship, Paul is exhorting them all to focus on

⁴ Ephesians 6:5; ellipses in Thurman's original text.

⁵ Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996; first published 1949), 30–31.

⁶ Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 620.

their relationship to Christ, and to each other through Christ. Paul is emphatically not saying any human being has the right to dominate another. To use Paul's words to justify slavery or other human systems of domination, in the past or today, is to misunderstand his teachings about our unity and freedom in Jesus Christ.

Freedom and Gender Norms

Like First Corinthians' seventh chapter, the first half of chapter 11 deals with gender. The latter passage is more puzzling, however, because of its statement that women should cover their heads when praying or prophesying "because of the angels" (11:10). As New Testament scholar Charles L. Campbell has written, this passage "has been recognized as one of the most tortured, contradictory, and confusing sections in all of Paul's letters."⁷

The fact that Paul views women and men as equal in Jesus Christ does not mean he would have abolished all social markers of gender—the visual and other cues that signify "female" or "male" in any given context. He seems to have a few reasons for saying women should not prophesy or pray in worship with uncovered heads. First, the gender norms of respectable, non-pagan society demanded it. In Greco-Roman society of the time, a woman wearing her hair loose and uncovered was associated not only with prostitution but also with the worship of pagan deities like Dionysius, Cybele, and Isis.⁸ Too, wearing a head-covering was the

norm for married Jewish women, and Judaism was the source of many early Christian ideas about gender. A second, related reason is that, therefore, Christian women who worshipped with uncovered heads might bring disrepute not only on themselves, but also on their husbands or even all their brothers in Christ. Paul doesn't state clearly whether he is concerned about either of these issues, or both.

The third reason for women to cover their heads sounds the strangest to twenty-first-century people: "because of the angels" (11:10). Paul explains neither why uncovered female heads might offend angels nor, alternatively, why angels might pose a danger to women with uncovered heads. He seems to assume his readers will easily make the connection. Those of us who are confused might take heart from Charles L. Campbell's assertion that "no one really understands what Paul is saying here."⁹ Two explanations seem most likely to be true. Possibly, women were to cover their heads in worship to show deference not only to Jewish-Christian social norms, but also to the angels who were believed to join Christians in worship. Alternatively, Paul may have believed women were vulnerable to sexual exploitation by angels when praying or prophesying, as they were especially open to the spiritual world in that moment.¹⁰ Genesis 6:1–4 writes of the "sons of God"—angels—reproducing with women. Paul may have understood this danger to be ongoing.

⁷ Charles L. Campbell, *1 Corinthians*, Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 175.

⁸ Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997), 185.

⁹ Charles L. Campbell, *1 Corinthians*, Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 181.

¹⁰ Michael J. Gorman, *1 Corinthians: A Theological, Pastoral and Missional Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2025), 281.

What do you do with puzzling biblical passages, like First Corinthians 11:10? How do you explore them with your Bible study partners? What would you ask Paul about them, if you could — or a female friend of his, like Lydia or Prisca/Priscilla?

Whatever Paul meant, this passage makes two things clear.

First, Paul did not reject all social gender norms, even as he exhorted Christians to distinguish themselves as a new creation in Jesus Christ. Subsequent generations of disciples have had to determine for ourselves which cultural gender norms to uphold, and which to abandon as unnecessary for people who are free in Christ.

Second, Paul assumes that women will pray and prophesy in public services of worship. Even though Christians might choose to uphold certain norms held by the broader society, he does not question women's fitness for leadership in the church.

How does your church deal with gender diversity, such as extending welcome to, or celebrating, nonbinary or transgender persons? If this diversity is not currently part of your congregational life, where else are you encountering gender diversity? How do you engage with, and learn from, people who have different experiences and points of view from yours?

TAKEAWAY

Although many ideas about gender and sexuality have changed since Paul's time, it remains the case that all people are worthy of love, and our various kinds of relationships are meant to help us live in more loving ways. As Christians face ethical quandaries that Jesus didn't address directly, we can find our way forward together, with the Holy Spirit's guidance.