

WHERE WE ARE HEADED

Although Paul continues to speak to issues of marriage and sexuality, the intent of this section in First Corinthians is *not* to serve as Paul's "marriage manual." Although there is much that he touches on, he really is addressing a particular question raised by the Corinthians and underscored in 7:1. Specifically, is it "more spiritual" to abstain from all sexual intimacy?

What prompts this question (and shapes his answer)? Some in Corinth had wrong ideas about how to live truly spiritual lives. And whether they had wrongly thought that celibacy was spiritually superior or that sexual intimacy (being a "bodily function") was somehow degrading, some were advocating both abstaining from all intimacy (even for the married) and going so far as suggesting that couples divorce so as to live more "spiritual" lives. And Paul intends to put an end to such misguided thinking.

WALKING THROUGH THE DISCUSSION

It goes without saying that the relationships that we have with others have *some* impact on our lives. (And that is something that the opening question will rightly raise to the surface.) We cannot ignore the reality that others around us do "rub off" on us—and that can be even more pronounced when we come to consider marriage.

It is that realization that serves as some of the background to the issue raised by the Corinthians. In 7:1 Paul introduces the first of a series of questions that they have written to him about. Specifically, they have asserted that "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman" (ESV).

Rooted in some wrong thinking about sexual intimacy and carried along by a desire to live "super spiritual" lives, some in Corinth had concluded that all sexual intimacy, in all relationships, was a hindrance to spiritual growth. And this resulted in a variety of dysfunctional attitudes and reactions among the married.

As we saw last week, one of the outgrowths of this misguided thinking was to insist that even among the married, it would be good to abstain from sexual intimacy. In 7:1-5, Paul replies to that kind of thinking with a resounding, "Not so!" In the context of heterosexual monogamous marriage, sexual intimacy is to be pursued—it is not a hindrance to spirituality.

But there were other trajectories into life from this misguided thinking. So, Paul turns to a variety of other situations where this wrong thinking about spirituality was apparently showing up.

If sexual intimacy was a hindrance to spirituality, then it would be better for those who had been married but now are widowed (the reference to the "unmarried" in 7:8 appears to refer to widowers, going along with the mention of "widows" in the same verse) to remain single. But Paul makes it clear that although it might be beneficial, not everyone who is widowed will be able to give themselves to that call of singleness (7:8-9). After all, he has made it clear that singleness is a gift

from God and all do not have the gift (7:6-7).

If sexual intimacy is a hindrance to spirituality, then some had concluded it might be better to simply end one's marriage so that one could more whole-heartedly pursue real spirituality. In 7:10-11, Paul replies to that kind of thinking with a resounding, "Not so!" In referring to what the Lord has said (7:10), he is anchoring these ideas in the very words of Jesus as found in the Gospels. One need not end marriage in order to pursue greater spirituality.

But some might go on to suggest that, surely, if one were married to *an unsaved person* it would be far better to divorce the unsaved spouse in order to pursue holy living. That is the issue Paul addresses in 7:12-16 and he again offers a clear "Not so!" Even in the case of a believer married to a non-believer (whether they began that way or whether one came to faith after they were wed) Paul does not endorse divorce.

What does Paul mean when he speaks of the unbelieving spouse being made "holy" by the believing spouse? He is not saying that the salvation of the one somehow "rubs off" on the unbelieving. What he seems to be addressing is the mistaken notion that the unbelieving spouse would, somehow, "contaminate" the spirituality of the believing spouse. But that is not true, as Paul sees it. The believing spouse actually brings a "sanctifying power" (the idea behind the word "holy") into the marriage. This doesn't mean that the unbeliever will either automatically or necessarily be saved (note 7:16), but it does mean that the spirituality of the believer is not crippled by the relationship that he or she has with his or her unbelieving spouse. This seems also to be the sense behind speaking of the children as "holy" and not "unclean."

When Paul offers something of a summary statement in 7:17, we can catch a clearer glimpse of what he is underscoring. The call for each person to "lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him" makes it clear that *one's life situation is not determinative with regard to one's personal spirituality*. That is, spiritual vitality is tied to being the person Jesus wants you to be *regardless of the situation or relationship* you find yourself in. Although some relationships might be more challenging than others, some relational dynamics might be far harder than others, you do not have to change those externals in order to live holy—contrary to what some in Corinth apparently had been advocating.

How can we bring this home to our own hearts—particularly if we are not asking the exact same question that the Corinthians were asking? It comes home to us as we respond to the heart of the issue. Specifically, do we act or live as if our spirituality (or lack thereof) is dependent on how well (or how poorly) our spouse is living? Do we live as if we could be "more spiritual" if it weren't for "that other person"? To the degree that we embrace such thinking we would do well to take to heart Paul's call here.

Live the life Jesus has called you to! That doesn't depend on others. That is between you and Him. So, without excuse or rationalization, give into His call and live and grow and flourish where you find yourself.

We will be
looking at 1
Corinthians
7:1-17

INITIAL THOUGHTS

Which of the many relationships that you have with others do you believe has the biggest impact on your spiritual life? Why?

REFLECTING ON THE TEXT

In 1 Corinthians 7:1, Paul begins to respond to questions that have been raised by the Corinthians. What is at the heart of the issue they raised? "Does my marriage help or hinder my spiritual life?" Some had concluded that sexual intimacy was a roadblock to further spiritual growth so they concluded that intimacy—even in marriage—should be avoided. So, Paul begins to address this thinking.

What does he say (in 7:1-5) to those who are currently married?

What counsel does he offer to those who have previously been married but are now widowed (in 7:8-9)?

What does he want those who are perhaps struggling in their marriages to see (in 7:10-11)?

What is his core thinking with regard to those who might find themselves married to one who isn't (yet) a believer (in 7:12-16)?

How might you summarize the various strands of advice Paul offers in 7:1-16? What is the underlying truth he is affirming?

BUILDING BRIDGES INTO LIFE

Although we might not be wrestling with the specific question raised by the Corinthians, we could be struggling with the broader issue. Namely, is my spirituality hampered by being married to the person I am married to. If you are married, when have you struggled with that kind of issue?

Drawing on the ideas that Paul has shared in this chapter, what do you think he might say to you?



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