

# Celibacy & Marriage

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We live in a day when people are ignorant or confused about God's will regarding celibacy and marriage. Many consider it natural to be involved in sexual immorality while single while others choose to live together outside of marriage. The confusion begins when we factor God out of the equation of sexuality and marriage. Without God, people are left to choose their own concept of right and wrong based on their own desires.

The Bible is clear that sexuality and marriage based on God's design. It was God who created mankind as male and female and joined them together as one in marriage (Genesis 2:21-25). Therefore, marriage according to God's design is a covenant—a binding commitment of one man and one woman to live together in sexual fidelity for life. This is why Jesus said that living together is not marriage (John 4:16-17), and that divorce was never a part of God's original plan (Matthew 19:3-12).

Believers in Corinth were being saved out of pagan and secular mindsets about sexuality and marriage. They were ignorant of God's plan regarding celibacy (sexual abstinence in a single state) and marriage. Therefore Paul sought to clear up these issues in 1 Corinthians 7:1-24.

Paul himself was single and celibate. Paul esteemed the state of Christian celibacy for himself and others as a way of serving God apart from marital distraction.

Many today view sexual abstinence in a single state as abnormal and strange. However, God's view is very different. In fact, Paul said: "It is good for a man not to touch a woman". "Touching a woman" was a euphemism for sexual immorality between a man and a woman (Gen 20:6; Ruth 2:9; Proverbs 6:29). Paul esteemed a lifestyle of celibacy for those Christians—single, unmarried, or widowed—who could commit to it. On the other hand, Paul also insisted that celibacy is not for everyone (verse 2). Unmarried Christians who have little self control in sexual matters should get married.

There are five Scriptural reasons for marriage: First is *procreation*. This is based on God's command for man to "be fruitful and multiply" (Genesis 1:28). God intends for mankind to reproduce itself. Second is *pleasure*. A man is to be "exhilarated always" with the wife of his youth (Proverbs 5:18–19), and the Song of Solomon esteems the physical attractions and pleasures of marital love. Third is *partnership*. God created the woman as a helper to the man (Genesis 2:18). Friendship between husband and wife is one of the key ingredients of a good marriage. Fourth, marriage is intended as a *picture* of Christ and the church: Husbands are to be the head over and to love their wives as Christ is head over and loves the church (Ephesians 5:23–32). Wives are to submit to and respect their husbands. The fifth reason is *purity*. Marriage protects humanity from sexual immorality and its consequences by meeting the natural human desire for physical intimacy.

Once people marry, Paul makes it clear that marriage partners are no longer free to refrain from sexual intimacy as if celibate (Verses 3-5). Husbands and wives are obligated and responsible to fulfill each other's desire for marital intimacy. It is part of God's design for marriage. Marriage partners are not owners of their own bodies. They are one flesh and belong to one another. Paul gives one exception: when there is mutual agreement for a temporary period for the sake of fasting

and prayer. Marriage partners are not to use spirituality to deprive their spouse of marital intimacy. In fact, Paul warns the married not to allow long intervals of fasting and prayer lest they lose their self-control and fall into Satan's temptations.

Paul insists that both celibacy and marriage are gifts from God (Verses 6-7). He neither commands celibacy or marriage. He simply emphasizes his preference for celibacy among those who can receive it. Neither does Paul infer that celibacy is superior to marriage. On the contrary, each person has his or her own gift from God—whether it be celibacy or marriage.

Next Paul gives instructions for the “unmarried” and “widowed” (Verses 8-9). Who are the “unmarried”? They are not widows. Neither are they virgins (never been married, verse 25). The unmarried are those who are divorced (see verse 11 where unmarried is the same as divorced.). Widows are those who have lost a spouse by death. Regarding widows, Paul felt it was best for them, especially older widows, to remain celibate and to serve the Lord (see Luke 2:36-38; 1 Timothy 5:5-9).

Now regarding Christian marriage, it must be noted that Scripture strictly forbids a Christian to marry an unbeliever (see verse 39; 2 Corinthians 6:14). Christians are free to marry whom they wish but only “in the Lord”. Jews who married pagan wives during Ezra's day were required to “put them away” (i.e. divorce them) to keep God's command.

Paul makes it clear that Christian marriage is permanent (Verses 10-11). This is the Lord's commandment. A Christian wife is not to leave (divorce) her Christian husband. However, as a matter of concession, Paul states that if the wife does leave her Christian husband, she is to remain unmarried (divorced) or be reconciled to her husband. Neither is a Christian husband to divorce his Christian wife. In the Spirit of Christ, Christians should commit to whatever it takes to reconcile differences and strengthen their marriage.

Next, Paul addresses “the rest” meaning marriages between two former unbelievers after one gets saved resulting in an unequally yoked condition (Verses 12-16): Rather than divorce the unbelieving partner, Paul states that if the unbelieving spouse is willing to live with the believing spouse (allowing them to live out their faith in Christ), then they are not to dissolve the marriage. This would be true regardless of whether the believer wants or doesn't want the marriage. In the eyes of God, the unbelieving spouse is “sanctified” by the believing spouse (i.e. it is regarded as a Christian home). The children of such marriages are considered holy unto the Lord (i.e., God will honor the believing spouse's claim over the children for the Lord).

In the event that the unbelieving spouse chooses to leave the marriage, the believing spouse is under no obligation to keep the marriage intact. Why? God has “called us to peace” and there is no guarantee that the unbeliever will be saved through preventing him or her to leave.

In summary, Christian celibacy is to be esteemed when it is used to serve the Lord. Those who choose to marry must live within God's guidelines for marriage, love their spouse, and glorify God in their marriage. In God's sight the marriage bond is regarded as permanent and can be dissolved only by death (Romans 7:2), adultery (Matthew 19:9), and an unbeliever's leaving. When the marriage bond is broken in any of these ways, a Christian is free to remarry. May God be glorified in your life whether by celibacy or marriage.