

“A Touchy Issue” (1 Corinthians 7:1-5)

Several years ago, I officiated a beautiful wedding ceremony for two virgins. Due to their love for Jesus Christ and their faithfulness and purity, I wanted to make sure that everything went perfectly well on their special day. During the wedding ceremony I shared a message on “How to Have a Successful Marriage.” Everything was going rather well when my speech slurred and I inadvertently said, “I want to make sure that the two of you have a SEX-cessful marriage.” A number of people grimaced and smirked. My wife was horrified. It will forever be one of my great blooper moments.

From that moment on, I decided that this would make a great book title—*How to Have a SEX-cessful Marriage*. In our world, a book with this title could sell millions. Of course, if I ever write such a book I would have to credit the apostle Paul in the acknowledgements. If he were still living, I would also have to share my royalties with him. But truth be known, I would be guilty of plagiarism because I would simply write all of Paul’s ideas in 1 Cor 7:1-5. In this passage Paul is going to answer several questions: What is God’s answer to my sex drive? How do I handle my struggles with self-control? When sexual temptations arise, how can I defeat them? Paul answers all of these questions and more in 1 Cor 7:1-5. In a nutshell, he will command us to *satisfy and protect our spouse*.

In these first five verses, Paul throws his weight around and exhorts us to fulfill our sexual desires through a loving, sacrificial relationship with our spouse. Paul begins with these words: **“Now concerning the things about which you wrote, it is good for a man not to touch a woman”** (7:1). Chapter 7 begins a new section of 1 Corinthians. The words, “Now concerning” prepare the reader for Paul’s response to the Corinthians’ question.¹ In the first six chapters of this letter, Paul has been dealing with sinful struggles in the life of the church in Corinth that he had heard about through Chloe’s people (cf. 1:11). But now, beginning in 7:1, Paul is going to respond to a whole series of questions that were addressed to him in a letter from the leadership of the church in Corinth. They were questions about practical issues like marriage, divorce, singleness, food offered to idols, spiritual gifts, public worship, what happens to our bodies when we die, and finally, a concern about an offering to be taken for some believers in Jerusalem who were in poverty. Paul will devote the rest of this letter to answering these questions.

In 7:1b, Paul cites a line from the Corinthians’ letter (“it is good for a man not to touch a woman”), which he intends to qualify and correct.² The phrase, “it is good for a man not to touch a woman,”³ has nothing to do with a hug, a handshake, or any other manifestation of fellowship or friendship. To “touch a woman”⁴ is a euphemism for sexual intercourse.⁵ Consequently, various English versions just drop the euphemism and translate “sexual relations” (NET, ESV). The phrase “to touch a woman” is translated “to marry” in the NIV, but this is weak. (The NIV does provide a better alternate reading.) Introducing the idea of marriage confuses the point that the Corinthians were promoting. The mindset of the Corinthians went way beyond issues of marriage or even celibacy.⁶ Some were promoting abstinence in the marriage relationship. The natural question is, “Why would the Corinthians not be interested in sex in the context of marriage?” We cannot know for certain, but the most likely suggestion is that there is an aesthetic group in the congregation. They believe that the highest plane of spirituality is to forgo sex.⁷

While this idea seems a bit odd to those of us who live in a sex-saturated society, it coincides with the doctrinal beliefs in Corinth. The Corinthians adhered to a Greek philosophical dualism that prioritizes the spirit over the body. Thus, in 6:12-20, the Corinthians justified sexual immorality because what they did in the body was not as important as what they did in the spirit. But dualism can also lead to a strong asceticism. Those who esteem the soul can argue that it is best for one to deny as many physical needs as possible. Obviously, both of these extremes are unbiblical. Paul compels us to *satisfy and protect our spouse*.

In 7:2, Paul gives the basic command: Continue to have sexual relations with your spouse.⁸ Paul writes, **“But because of immoralities, each man is to have his own wife, and each woman is to have her own husband.”** The word “but” expresses Paul’s disagreement with the proposition quoted in 7:1. Paul vehemently disagrees that married couples should abstain from sexual pleasure. Paul is not anti-sex; he is pro-marriage! This is confirmed by his use of the verb “to have,” which is a euphemism for sexual relations. In other words, rather than abstaining from sexual relations, Paul’s expectation is that husbands and wives continue in normal sexual relations.¹⁰ Moreover, the word “have” is a present tense command that implies “keep.” Thus, Paul commands, “Let each man live sexually with his wife, and let each wife live sexually with her husband.” The Lord’s provision for sexual immorality is to get married and have frequent sex. Marriage is the answer to immorality of all kinds. *Satisfy and protect your spouse.*

Paul continues his exhortation and clarification by explaining each spouse’s sexual responsibilities in marriage. In 7:3, he writes, **“The husband must fulfill his duty to his wife, and likewise also the wife to her husband.”**¹¹ What does this verse mean? It means what every man hopes it means! For many of us this is one of the greatest verses in the Bible. It is a duty that we delight in. It is the one job that we want to spend overtime at. But before we get too carried away, I want us to notice a number of things: ***First, Paul begins by addressing husbands.*** He says it is the husband’s duty to fulfill his wife. Now many of you husbands are saying, “Now this is one Bible verse I’ll be glad to take literally.” Hold your horses! Paul begins with husbands because we are the ones that are ultimately responsible for the sexual relationship. We are the spiritual leaders! Husband, here Paul indicates that you must “fulfill” your wife. This doesn’t just mean sex. It means finding out what she needs, when she needs it, and how she needs it. Of course, I realize that you don’t have a clue how to do this. That’s where communication comes in. You are responsible for facilitating communication with your wife. Ladies, this means that you have to tell your husband how he can “minister” to you. If you do not communicate and respond to him well, he will become disillusioned and frustrated.

Second, Paul begins with husbands because they often neglect to fulfill this command. In the course of my pastoral counseling, I have known slightly more men who have struggled to fulfill their duty than vice versa. A big misnomer is that women are the ones that always have a headache. This is not always true. Some men are too tired when it is time for sex. Many men are addicted to porn, which takes away a husband’s sexual drive for his wife. Often, it is just a matter of laziness. Some men know that sex can take a while and they are just lazy, so they fail to fulfill their duty to their wife. Yet, women experience intimacy through sex. Furthermore, when you deprive your wife of sex, she is left feeling like you don’t find her attractive.¹² Husband, *satisfy and protect your wife.*

Third, Paul honors and elevates women. So many people like to suggest that Paul is a male sexist pig. However, I wonder if these individuals have carefully read the Bible. Like Jesus, Paul always takes a high view of women. In this context, Paul is moving away from the usual Roman norm in which the husband dominated the wife. In Christian marriages, there is a mutuality of relationship. He clearly elevates women and also declares them to be sexual creatures that have desires and needs.¹³ Husbands, this means you must meet the sexual needs of your wife. This includes her emotional, mental, and spiritual needs as well. When you put your wife’s needs first, by God’s grace, your sexual needs will be met as well.

Now, wives, this verse also applies to you. You are commanded by God to fulfill your husband’s sexual needs. Paul also makes a point here of using the word “fulfill,” meaning “to make full, to bring to completion, to develop the full potential.” The word fulfill is a present active command. This means that you should ensure that your husband is fully satisfied and vice versa. Ladies, whatever your husband wants that is not immoral or illegal, give it to him. Make sure that your marriage bed is so hot that your husband will not ever go looking elsewhere! There is nothing dirty about this; it is entirely biblical. Why should the world have the greatest sex? The greatest sex should be among married couples who are devoted to Christ. Wife, *satisfy and protect your spouse.*

Now, please understand, this verse teaches that sex is a delight, but it is also a duty. A “duty” is a moral or legal responsibility or obligation that arises from one’s position. It is the duty of each married person to meet the sexual needs of his or her partner. This means sex should never be used as a bribe or reward for good behavior, or as something to be withheld as a threat or punishment. It is a “duty!” The spouse who withholds sex sins against God and his or her partner.

For instance, let’s say the husband makes sexual overtures to his wife. The Bible teaches that it is her responsibility as his wife to have sex. Why? Because in this case, the husband has a sexual drive, seeking fulfillment and it’s her duty to make sure his needs are met. Therefore, whenever your spouse initiates sex in your direction, make sure you keep in mind that you are under God-given direction to meet your spouse’s sexual needs. This is what you signed up for. You made this commitment before God and mankind. Therefore, before a couple gets married, the question needs to be asked, “Are you willing to be sexually available to your spouse till death do you part?” If the answer is, “Well, I’m not so sure about that,” I would suggest that the couple postpone their marriage or not get married at all.

Let’s catch our breath and pose a question: Which of the two marital partners must be the one to decide if the sexual drives or desires are completely satisfied? The one initiating sex. In other words, the only way a husband can know if he has “fulfilled his duty” as a husband is to ask his wife, “Are your sexual needs fully satisfied? Do you feel loved?” This means, in the bedroom of a married couple anything goes—short of illegal or immoral activity.

How often should sex occur? If the average couple has sex 2-3 times a week, should Christians who are filled with the Holy Spirit and called to live supernatural lives have sex more or less frequently? I’ll give you my personal bias. The more frequent your sex, the stronger your marriage bond.

Why should married partners always fulfill their duty to their spouse? This is a legitimate question that Paul answers in 7:4. **“The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband *does*; and likewise also the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife *does*.”** God sovereignly takes something away at the point of marriage and gives it as a heavenly wedding present to your spouse. The Lord doesn’t ask you if He can take it, and the Lord doesn’t ask you if you want it. Sovereignly, the Lord takes the authority you have had over your own body as a single individual and removes it from you for as long as you live. The term “authority” in this passage literally means to have rights over or exclusive claim to. In uncomplicated terms, God gave my body to my wife and I have nothing to say about it.

Note that Paul was careful to give both husband and wife equal rights in these verses. He did not regard the man as having sexual rights or needs that the woman does not have or vice versa. So if your wife wants to feel your muscles, let her feel them. If your husband wants to grab your bottom, let him grab it. This principle applies in the sexual realm; however, I also think there is great application in other areas of life. Several examples come to mind: tattoos, piercings, facial hair, length of hair, attire, birth control, body appearance, etc. are all decisions that your husband or wife can veto. We ought to ask, “How can I look better to you? What do you want from me? How can I serve you?”

Paul frequently uses the term “body” (*soma*) in its broadest, fullest, richest sense. It’s everything we are physically, emotionally, and spiritually. We’re designed by God to be an instrument of communication verbally, nonverbally, emotionally, physically, and sexually. The physical expression of sex as communication is enjoyed in the larger context of verbal communication. The greatest sexual fulfillment comes gradually over the long haul in a marriage, as a couple learns to talk about anything, any time; when there’s heart-to-heart communication, not just talking at each other, but listening actively and sensitively, caring deeply about the communication. How are you doing in these areas today?

If I were to ask your spouse, what would he or she say? Would your spouse be fulfilled and pleased by how you are treating her body or his body?

Our passage closes in 7:5 with these potent words: **“Stop depriving one another, except by agreement for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer, and come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.”**¹⁴ The word translated “stop depriving” literally means “do not rob one another,” or “do not do fraud to one another.” The word means to cheat somebody out of what is properly theirs. If you withhold your body when your partner seeks sex, it is biblical fraud.¹⁵ We have failed to *satisfy and protect our spouse*.

Paul writes that we may deprive each other of sex under only four conditions. ***First, sex can be withheld when you both agree.*** You can't decide by yourself to deprive your spouse of sex. Both of you must agree not to have sex in order to fit into this exception. Here's how this may work in real life: Let's say that last night your spouse rolled over in bed and made a sexual advance. Because you had a long and exhausting day, you said, “I'm really tired tonight. Would it be alright with you if we waited until tomorrow night? If not, sweetheart, you know that tonight is okay too. What would you like?”

Biblically speaking, who has the final say in this decision? The initiating partner always has the final say. If your spouse wants sex, even after hearing your request, he or she still has authority over your body. However, just because your body belongs to your spouse doesn't mean you don't have the freedom to negotiate! When the initiating partner hears a willing but tired attitude of acceptance rather than rejection, understanding should be forthcoming.

Second, sex can be deprived when you both agree to delay it for a time. Whenever a couple mutually agrees to deprive one another of sexual intimacy, the two must agree when they will have sex. To agree only to “not tonight” would not be following the biblical pattern. Scripture uses a very specific Greek word (*kairos*) for time here, which means a *specific period* of time.

Third, sex can be set aside to devote yourselves to prayer. This certainly presents a clear and rather unusual freedom for depriving yourself of sexual relations in modern society. The only biblical purpose for depriving yourselves of sex is to devote yourselves to sharing a spiritual focus in your marriage.

Finally, sex can be deprived until the two of you agree to come together again. The Bible quickly brings us back to the reality that sexual intimacy is to be the norm and never the exception. Always remember, we are called to *satisfy and protect our spouse*.

Now, there are two important realities to keep in mind. ***First, if you deprive each other you open yourself to attack.*** Paul blatantly states that in sexual matters, you must come together after an agreed upon time of sexual abstinence, or you will open yourself up to satanic attack. After a period of time without sex, you are to come together again. If you don't, Satan will come against you with temptations to commit sexual immorality. The longer sex is postponed in the marital partnership, the greater the risk of temptation.

Please take this very seriously. Satan is not a pushover. He is real and he is powerful. He holds millions firmly in his bondage. And he is seeking more all the time. In one of his sermons, Pastor John Piper tells a story of the experience of one of his members. On an airline flight, the person sitting next to this individual turned down a meal, and when asked why he said that he was fasting and praying to Satan. When asked what he was praying for, he said, the breakdown of ministers' marriages. If you were a Satan worshiper, and you wanted to know what the goals of your master were so that you would know how to pray, where would you go to learn? You would go to the Bible, because the Bible gives a true picture of what Satan is about in the world. And you would learn that, among other things, he is about the destruction of marriages. He is totally committed to adultery, and all the personal problems that lead to it.

When you battle with sexual temptation, you battle against Satan. Not because he creates the desire, but because he so powerfully and deceptively uses the desire.¹⁶

As married couples, we must guard our marriages from Satan. He is seeking to devour the marriage bed. Therefore, don't let him into your bed. Imagine this common scenario: A couple in bed with their back turned to each other and plenty of space in between. Guess who can slither right into the marriage bed? A simple way to avoid this is being close before you drift off to sleep. Roll over and cuddle your partner every night. Put your head on his or her chest or shoulder. Play "footsies." If these intimate moments lead to making love...wonderful. But regardless, you've shared some intimate moments and are taking one additional step to protect the marriage bed.

Second, you lack self-control when you deprive each other of sex. What happens to married individuals when they don't have sex for a period of days? Satan tempts you, taking advantage of your lack of self-control. Depriving your spouse of sexual relations results in more than immediate, short-lived frustration. Continued postponement of sexual relations within a marriage places very real and unnecessary pressure on a spouse.

Sexual response and impulse touches us more than physically, it also touches us emotionally and spiritually because God made us that way. We have to avoid two opposite evils: on the one hand, the Victorian prudishness that wants to deny sex, call it something dirty, and lock it away; and on the other hand, the more modern hedonism that tells us sex is an absolute good and that we ought to pursue our sexual impulses no matter what.

If we Christians ignore sex, we will surrender it to those very cultural perversions and give the impression that sex itself is bad *because* it's so abused. But you can't fix what is wrong by simply negating or ignoring it. Nobody lives in the world of "no." We all have to know how to say "Yes" in the right way. It's not enough to be people who hate evil; we must also be people who love good, and we must teach our children to love good. A pastor mentioned recently that he heard a non-Christian describe Christians as "people who say 'No' to everything and go to a lot of meetings." Ouch. We're much better at saying what not to do than what to do. Sexuality is deeply perverted in our culture. But we have to do more than negate the negative. We also have to articulate powerfully the joy of God's way, to show the beauty of holiness. The word of the Lord for us today is to *satisfy and protect our spouse*.

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Scripture Reference

1 Corinthians 7:1-7
Matthew 19:11-12
Proverbs 5:15-19
Song of Solomon 4:9-5:1
Ephesians 5:21-33
1 Thessalonians 4:3-8
Hebrews 13:4

Study Questions

1. Paul states that one reason to get married is to avoid sexual immorality (7:2). Yet, many well meaning contemporary Christians push their children and other young adults to postpone marriage until they are especially mature, capable, and responsible. Can this be biblically justified? Is this really God's intent, or are we going beyond the Scriptures and leading our children into temptation? Read Matthew 18:6-7.
2. Paul calls sex a "duty" to be "fulfilled" (7:3). Why does he use this type of language? How does Paul's teaching apply to married couples with different sex drives? What advice would Paul give to married couples whose sex life has faded because of the pressures and busyness of life? How can such couples become more frequent?
3. Richard Foster observes, "Sex in the real world is a mixture of tenderness and halitosis, love and fatigue, ecstasy and disappointment." How can we as Christians realistically enjoy God's gift of sexual intimacy without getting caught up in the expectations and fanfare of the world we live in? How can we effectively and accurately teach our children and teens about sex in a way that honors God?
4. How can married couples apply the biblical principle that "my body belongs to my spouse" (7:4-5)? How will greater personal sacrifice and leniency protect married couples from Satan? Why does Satan seek to obliterate Christian marriages? How can I so fulfill my spouse that Satan is left frustrated and flees to focus on another marriage?
5. In what ways are both celibacy and marriage gifts from God (7:6-7)? Am I presently content in the role that God has called me to occupy? Why or why not? Will I praise Him that if I am single or unhappily married that He is more than sufficient?

Notes

¹ The remainder of the body of 1 Corinthians deals with questions the Corinthians had put to Paul in a letter. Paul introduced each of these with the phrase *peri de* (“now concerning,” 7:1, 25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1, 12).

² See David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 251. Verbrugge aptly comments, “Thus, since the phrase ‘it is good for a man not to have sexual relations [within marriage]’ is so contrary to Paul’s view, it is probably best to see it as representing something the Corinthians have written in their letter to Paul and are asking him about.” Verlyn D. Verbrugge, “1 Corinthians” in the *Revised Expositors Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, awaiting publication), 136.

³ See also NRSV, NJB, KJV, and NKJV.

⁴ Furthermore, the use of the Greek word *anthropos* (man generically, people) rather than *aner* (man as distinguished from woman) indicates that the statement pertains to human beings generally.

⁵ “It is good for a man not to touch a woman,” a euphemism for sexual relations. This idiom occurs ten times in Greek literature, and all of the references except one appear to refer to sexual relations (cf., e.g., Josephus, *Ant.* 1.8.1 [1.163]; Gen 20:6 [LXX]; Prov 6:29 [LXX]). For discussion see G.D. Fee, *First Corinthians* (NICNT), 275. Many recent interpreters believe that here again (as in 6:12-13) Paul cites a slogan the Corinthians apparently used to justify their actions. If this is so, Paul agrees with the slogan in part, but corrects it in the following verses to show how the Corinthians misused the idea to justify abstinence within marriage (cf. 8:1, 4; 10:23). See also G. D. Fee, “1 Corinthians 7:1” in the NIV, *JETS* 23 (1980): 307-314.” See NET Study Bible Notes.

⁶ This is why the NLT’s rendering is misleading as well: “Now regarding the questions you asked in your letter. Yes, it is good to live a celibate life.”

⁷ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 263-266, cites twelve different possibilities as to why some in Corinth were arguing for sexual asceticism. Among the possibilities are: a repudiation of the licentiousness of the culture, debates between the Cynics and Stoics that sexual relations distracted one from pursuing wisdom and philosophy, and pneumatism (the view that ideally marriage was the union of two spirits and not two bodies).

⁸ I am especially grateful for the insights of Bruce Wilkinson in 1 Cor 7:2-5. See Bruce Wilkinson, *Set Apart: Discovering Personal Victory Through Holiness* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 1998 [2003]), 146-159.

⁹ This is most likely a reference to Prov 5:15, 18: “Drink water from your own cistern and fresh water from your own well...Let your fountain be blessed, And rejoice in the wife of your youth.” See Brian S. Rosner, *Paul, Scripture, & Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 158-159.

¹⁰ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 256; Verbrugge, *1 Corinthians*, 137. See the LXX of Exod 2:1-2; Deut 28:30; Isa 13:16; see also Matt 14:4; Mark 6:18; 12:33; John 4:8.

¹¹ The idea that husbands and wives owe each other conjugal rights in 7:3 can be traced to Exod 21:10, where it is said of the husband, “he shall not diminish her food, clothing, or her conjugal rights.” Rosner, *Paul, Scripture, & Ethics*, 159.

¹² Oxytocin levels spike to three to five times higher than usual just before orgasm. The hormone is more intense in females than in males, so women develop a stronger sense of bonding through sex.

¹³ David W.J. Gill, “1 Corinthians” in Clinton E. Arnold, *Zondervan Illustrated Biblical Background Commentary: Vol 3 Romans to Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 135.

¹⁴ Abstinence in preparation for religious activities is attested in Exod 19:15; Lev 15:18; 1 Sam 21:4-6 (cf. 2 Sam 11:8-13; Eccl 3:5; Joel 2:16; Zech 12:12-14). Rosner, *Paul, Scripture, & Ethics*, 160.

¹⁵ Paul uses the same Greek verb for “deprive” (*apostereom*) as he did for “cheating” in 1 Cor 6:7-8. This is strong language indeed and demonstrates that Paul is serious when he views intimate relations as an obligation (7:3). Verbrugge, *1 Corinthians*, 137.

¹⁶ John Piper, “Satan Uses Sexual Desire” (1 Cor 7:1-7):

http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Sermons/ByScripture/19/467_Satan_Uses_Sexual_Desire/.