



# **Pleasant Ridge Baptist Church**

**What does the Bible say about...**

**Marriage**

**1 Corinthians 7:1-16**

**03/10/2019**

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## **Main Point**

If we hope to honor God in our marriages, we must submit to His design for them. Marriage is not designed primarily for my happiness, but for holiness and eternal impact.

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## **Introduction**

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

**What did you grow up dreaming about experiencing in marriage?**

**What are some specific ways—either positively or negatively—your family situation (parents, their marriage, etc.) has affected your view of marriage?**

**Are there any marriages you look up to or admire? What is it about those marriages that makes them admirable?**

**Why do you think marriage is important to God?**

God established marriage not for our personal happiness but as a representation of His relationship with His followers, for our holiness and sanctification. The text we will look at in today's discussion challenges us to pursue individual holiness, regardless of our marital situation. Focusing on being a godly person is the key to a successful marriage and relationship, because holiness is more important than happiness.

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## **Understanding**

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

**Aside from your family situation, what are the major influences in your life that have shaped your view of marriage? What has led you to marry or to remain single?**

God knows the power of relationships. He designed marriage—the most intimate earthly relationship—as a way to motivate spouses to pursue Christ. But relationships also have the power to push us away from Him. The apostle Paul illustrated this point in 1 Corinthians 7.

**HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ 1 CORINTHIANS 7:1-11.**

**What was Paul's perspective on marriage and singleness?**

**What do you see as the main differences between a Christian view of marriage and a non-Christian view of marriage?**

**Why do you think God calls us to put our spouse's needs above our own? How does doing so change our own perspective?**

**What relational bad decisions does Paul allude to in 1 Corinthians 7:1-11? How do these types of decisions hinder a person's pursuit of holiness?**

Some of those bad decisions that Paul drew attention to include withholding sex from a spouse (verse 5), sexual promiscuity (verses 8-9), and divorce (verse 11). Spouses have a mutual obligation to place their spouse's needs ahead of their own. By encouraging both the husband and the wife to fulfill their marital duties, Paul placed the emphasis on serving one's partner and placing his/her needs first, rather than relying on him/her to make you happy. Whether married or not, this type of sacrificial service should be the way we approach all our relationships, not just romantic ones. When we put others first, we are challenged to become more godly people who love others the way Christ loves us.

Focusing on the pursuit of holiness, rather than relational happiness, is the key to a successful marriage and relationship.

**HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ 1 CORINTHIANS 7:12-16.**

All marriages face challenges, and those involving Christians with non-Christians have additional challenges; but working through the challenges and remaining faithful to Christ honors God and demonstrates the gospel.

**In what ways is an unbelieving spouse "made holy" because of his or her marriage to a Christian?**

**What challenges does a Christian married to an unbeliever face when pursuing personal holiness?**

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## **Application**

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

**In your own words, how would you explain the main goal of a Christian marriage?**

**What happens in a marriage when our hearts are set on our own happiness rather than on honoring God and personal holiness?**

**In what areas of your marriage would you say you are more focused on your own happiness than you are on holiness? What needs to change?**

**What counsel would you give a Christian friend who is married to a non-Christian?**

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## Pray

Lead your group in prayer, asking God to strengthen the marriages of our church based on the truths of His Word. Ask Him to continue to grow us in holiness. Pray that marriages would be marked by individuals who are meeting their spouse's needs and are focused on glorifying God.

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## Commentary

### 1 CORINTHIANS 7:1-16

7:1-4. This verse presents a Corinthian position, stated in correspondence previously sent to Paul, that recommended celibacy in marriage. What a divide in the Corinthian church! Some advocated marital celibacy while others were engaged in gross sexual immorality. Sexual

desires, which can readily lead to sexual immorality, commend frequent sexual union between husband and wife. The phrase have the right in this context refers to sexual relations.

7:5. Paul issues an apostolic ruling: husbands and wives must not deprive one another sexually in marriage, except when mutually agreed upon for the sake of devotion to prayer. Like fasting from food and drink, periods of marital celibacy can hone one's focus on the one great desire: God Himself.

7:6-11. Paul expressed limited agreement to the view stated in verse 1, "It is good for a man not to have relations with a woman." He did think it was "good" if the Corinthians stayed single as he was—but only if they had the gift to do so. Paul gives another apostolic ruling: unmarried persons who lack self-control should get married. Paul reiterates the Lord's ruling to the married, giving an injunction to wives that they must remain in their marriage (see Matt. 19:1-9; Mark 10:1-12). The wife who has separated from her husband has two options: remain apart from him, though celibate, or be reconciled to her husband. Completing his reiteration of the Lord's instructions for marriage, Paul insisted that the husband is not to leave his wife.

7:12-13. The phrase to the rest is a reference to mixed marriages—a believer married to an unbeliever. Christians were only to marry "in the Lord" (v. 39). The situation Paul addresses here assumes that both spouses were unbelievers when they married but that one of them thereafter converted to Christianity. Since Jesus did not comment on this situation, Paul gave an apostolic ruling: the believing spouse must not leave the unbelieving spouse. One can easily conceive of the self-sacrifice entailed by this ethic. The passage also assumes that the unbeliever agrees that there are benefits to continuing the marital relationship ( is willing to live with him or her).

7:14. A Christian spouse who remains faithful to his or her unbelieving spouse has a "sanctifying effect" on unbelieving family members. Paul is referring not just to the possible future salvation of unbelievers in the household, but to their present protection from pagan values through the influence of the Christian member's exemplary morals.

7:15-16. Paul gives a qualification to the above ruling: Do not hinder a nonbeliever's desire to separate. Peace in this context refers to being "at peace" if the unbelieving spouse should decide to leave, for in this event the believer has done nothing wrong.

Up to this point, Paul had been dealing with the sins reported to be known in the Corinthian congregation. Now he takes up the questions about which they had written to him: marriage (1 Cor. 7:1, 25), food offered to idols (1 Cor. 8:1), spiritual gifts (1 Cor. 12:1), the resurrection of the dead (1 Cor. 15:1), and the missionary offering for the Jews (1 Cor. 16:1).

As you study 1 Corinthians 7, please keep in mind that Paul is replying to definite questions. He is not spelling out a complete “theology of marriage” in one chapter. It is necessary to consider as well what the rest of the Bible has to say about this important subject.

Some liberal critics have accused Paul of being against both marriage and women. These accusations are not true, of course. Nor is it true that in 1 Corinthians 7:6, 10, 12, and 25 Paul is disclaiming divine inspiration for what he wrote. Rather, he is referring to what Jesus taught when He was on earth (Matt. 5:31–32; 19:1–12; Mark 10:1–12; Luke 16:18). Paul had to answer some questions that Jesus never discussed; but when a question arose that the Lord had dealt with, Paul referred to His words. Instead of disclaiming inspiration, Paul claimed that what he wrote was equal in authority to what Christ taught.

Paul explained God’s will concerning Christian marriage, and he addressed his counsel to three different groups of believers.

### **Christians Married to Christians (1 Cor. 7:1–11)**

Apparently one of the questions the church asked was, “Is celibacy [remaining unmarried] more spiritual than marriage?” Paul replied that it is good for a man or a woman to have the gift of celibacy, but the celibate state is not better than marriage, nor is it the best state for everybody. Dr. Kenneth Wuest translates Paul’s reply, “It is perfectly proper, honorable, morally befitting for a man to live in strict celibacy.”

First Corinthians 7:6 makes it clear that celibacy is permitted, but it is not commanded; and 1 Corinthians 7:7 informs us that not everybody has the gift of remaining celibate. This ties in with our Lord’s teaching in Matthew 19:10–12, where “eunuchs” refers to those who abstain from marriage. “It is not good that the man should be alone” (Gen. 2:18) is generally true for most people; but some have been called to a life of singleness for one reason or another. Their singleness is not “subspiritual” or “superspiritual.” It all depends on the will of God.

One purpose for marriage is “to avoid fornication.” First Corinthians 7:2 makes it clear that God does not approve either of polygamy or homosexual “marriages.” One man married to one woman has been God’s pattern from the first. However, the husband and wife must not abuse the privilege of sexual love that is a normal part of marriage. The wife’s body belongs to the

husband, and the husband's body to the wife; and each must be considerate of the other. Sexual love is a beautiful tool to build with, not a weapon to fight with. To refuse each other is to commit robbery (see 1 Thes. 4:6) and to invite Satan to tempt the partners to seek their satisfaction elsewhere.

As in all things, the spiritual must govern the physical; for our bodies are God's temples. The husband and wife may abstain in order to devote their full interest to prayer and fasting (1 Cor. 7:5); but they must not use this as an excuse for prolonged separation. Paul is encouraging Christian partners to be "in tune" with each other in matters both spiritual and physical.

In 1 Corinthians 7:8-9, Paul applied the principle stated in 1 Corinthians 7:1 to single believers and widows: If you cannot control yourself, then marry.

Not only did the church ask about celibacy, but they also asked Paul about divorce. Since Jesus had dealt with this question, Paul cited His teaching: Husbands and wives are not to divorce each other (see also 1 Cor. 7:39). If divorce does occur, the parties should remain unmarried or seek reconciliation.

This is, of course, the ideal for marriage. Jesus did make one exception: If one party was guilty of fornication, this could be grounds for divorce. Far better that there be confession, forgiveness, and reconciliation; but if these are out of the question, then the innocent party may get a divorce. However, divorce is the last option; first, every means available should be used to restore the marriage.

It has been my experience as a pastor that when a husband and wife are yielded to the Lord, and when they seek to please each other in the marriage relationship, the marriage will be so satisfying that neither partner would think of looking elsewhere for fulfillment. "There are no sex problems in marriage," a Christian counselor once told me, "only personality problems with sex as one of the symptoms." The present frightening trend of increased divorces among Christians (and even among the clergy) must break the heart of God.

### **Christians Married to Non-Christians (1 Cor. 7:12-24)**

Some of the members of the Corinthian church were saved after they had been married, but their mates had not yet been converted. No doubt, some of these believers were having a difficult time at home; and they asked Paul, "Must we remain married to unsaved partners? Doesn't our conversion alter things?"

Paul replied that they were to remain with their unconverted mates so long as their mates were willing to live with them. Salvation does not alter the marriage state; if anything, it ought

to enhance the marriage relationship. (Note Peter's counsel to wives with unsaved husbands in 1 Peter 3:1–6.) Since marriage is basically a physical relationship ("they shall be one flesh"—Gen. 2:24), it can only be broken by a physical cause. Adultery and death would be two such causes (1 Cor. 7:39).

It is an act of disobedience for a Christian knowingly to marry an unsaved person (note "only in the Lord" in 1 Cor. 7:39; 2 Cor. 6:14). But if a person becomes a Christian after marriage, he should not use that as an excuse to break up the marriage just to avoid problems. In fact, Paul emphasized the fact that the Christian partner could have a spiritual influence on the unsaved mate. First Corinthians 7:14 does not teach that the unsaved partner is saved because of the believing mate, since each person must individually decide for Christ. Rather, it means that the believer exerts a spiritual influence in the home that can lead to the salvation of the lost partner.

What about the children? Again, the emphasis is on the influence of the godly partner. The believing husband or wife must not give up. In my own ministry, I have seen devoted Christians live for Christ in divided homes and eventually see their loved ones trust the Saviour.

Salvation does not change the marriage state. If the wife's becoming a Christian annulled the marriage, then the children in the home would become illegitimate ("unclean" in 1 Cor. 7:14). Instead, these children may one day be saved if the Christian mate is faithful to the Lord.

It is difficult for us who are "accustomed" to the Christian faith to realize the impact that this new doctrine had on the Roman world. Here was a teaching for every person, regardless of race or social status. The church was perhaps the only assembly in the Roman Empire where slaves and freemen, men and women, rich and poor, could fellowship on an equal basis (Gal. 3:28). However, this new equality also brought with it some misunderstandings and problems; and some of these Paul dealt with in 1 Corinthians 7:17–24.

The principle that Paul laid down was this: Even though Christians are all one in Christ, each believer should remain in the same calling he was in when the Lord saved him. Jewish believers should not try to become Gentiles (by erasing the physical mark of the covenant), and Gentiles should not try to become Jews (by being circumcised). Slaves should not demand freedom from their Christian masters, just because of their equality in Christ. However, Paul did advise Christian slaves to secure their freedom if at all possible, probably by purchase. This same principle would apply to Christians married to unsaved mates.

But suppose the unsaved mate leaves the home? First Corinthians 7:15 gives the answer: the Christian partner is not obligated to keep the home together. We are called to peace, and we

should do all we can to live in peace (Rom. 12:18); but there comes a time in some situations where peace is impossible. If the unsaved mate separates from his or her partner, there is little the Christian can do except to pray and continue faithful to the Lord.

Does separation then give the Christian mate the right to divorce and remarriage? Paul did not say so. What if the unconverted mate ends up living with another partner? That would constitute adultery and give grounds for divorce. But even then, 1 Corinthians 7:10–11 would encourage forgiveness and restoration. Paul did not deal with every possible situation. He laid down spiritual principles, not a list of rules.

We are prone to think that a change in circumstances is always the answer to a problem. But the problem is usually within us and not around us. The heart of every problem is the problem in the heart. I have watched couples go through divorce and seek happiness in new circumstances, only to discover that they carried their problems with them. A Christian lawyer once told me, "About the only people who profit from divorces are the attorneys!"

Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 590–592.