

The first pages of the Bible tell the story of God making the world and forming a man named Adam to live in the world. At that time, the world was perfect and pristine—not a single pollutant in the water or air, not a blade of grass out of place. Everything that God made, he looked at and said, “This is good. This is good. This is good.” But then he looked at Adam and said, “This one thing is not good.” It’s not that Adam’s hairline was receding or that he had an unhealthy commitment to his fantasy football league. It’s not that he had developed a dad bod. (I heard one guy say, “It’s not a dad bod, it’s a father figure.” That doesn’t make it any better.) That’s not what was wrong. God said, “It is not good for man to be alone.”

It wasn’t that he was all alone. God was there with him, and he had the entire animal kingdom around him. But there is a world of difference between watching a sunset with a woman and watching a sunset with a hippopotamus. Everything else was good. But Adam being alone wasn’t good. So God caused Adam to fall asleep, then he took a rib from Adam’s side and formed a woman who was named Eve. The two of them came together, and they were naked yet they felt no shame.

At the very beginning of the human story, God gave men and women the gift of marriage. Sometimes, especially when we are younger or still in the honeymoon stage of a relationship, we view marriage idyllically. We think of marriage from Genesis chapter 2 as a fulfilling gift from God, a blissful life-long romance with perfect health and perfect children, perfect jobs and perfect bank accounts, perfect houses and perfect cars, perfect vacations and of course, perfect long walks on the beach. That’s how we conceptualize marriage, as if we still lived in a Genesis 2 world. But there’s one significant problem with that. We no longer live in a Genesis 2 world; we live in a Genesis 3 world. Turn one page and see how Adam and Eve chose to sin. Sin entered into the world and corrupted everything. There is death and decay everywhere we look. Sin left its destructive fingerprints on creation; there are hurricanes and tornadoes and earthquakes. Sin had a similar impact on marriage. Maybe some of you are in a place where you are feeling that right now. We go from marital bliss in Genesis 2 to marital blisters in Genesis 3. We end up with shame and blame, pride and insecurity, deception, addiction, selfishness, poor communication, baggage from past relationships, dysfunction from family of origin—the list goes on and on.

Marriage can be a real struggle. The good news is that God’s word speaks into this. The Bible doesn’t end with Genesis 3. There are over a thousand chapters that come after it that tell us how God meets us in our sin and dysfunction, our brokenness and pain, and brings his presence and truth, his grace, healing and redemption, which impacts all of life, including our marriages. We are going to read three different sections of 1 Corinthians 7, all of which give us wisdom about marriage.

Now for the matters you wrote about: “It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.” But since sexual immorality is occurring, each man should have sexual relations with his own wife, and each woman with her own husband. The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. The wife does not have authority over her own body but yields it to her husband. In the same way, the husband does not have authority over his own body but yields it to his wife. Do not deprive each other except perhaps by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. (1 Corinthians 7:1-5)

There are lots of fascinating and counter-cultural aspects to what Paul said in this passage, but the essence of the teaching is this: *if you are married, your body is not your own*. That’s hard for us to hear in our culture because we constantly hear about bodily autonomy, individual authority, and self-determination. Although those terms have value in certain contexts, the Bible teaches that when two people get married,

there is a fundamental shift in their identity and personhood. Jesus spoke about this in Matthew 19:5-6: “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh”? So they are no longer two, but one flesh.” The same truth is emphasized three different times: united to his wife / the two will become one flesh / no longer two, but one flesh. It’s not as though we become Siamese twins conjoined by the shoulders, but in a very real way, you are one with your spouse, which means your body doesn’t belong only to you, but to the person to whom you are married.

The main idea of this passage is *if you are married, your body is not your own*, and the application is to *prioritize unity with your spouse*. The specific type of unity that is talked about in this passage is sexual unity. The Bible says husbands and wives should fulfill their “marital duty” to one another. Let’s be honest—this is not the most romantic way of describing things. But here’s the thing: all the modern research says and every marriage expert knows how important a role physical intimacy plays in marriage. The Bible says it’s important to be together with your spouse, which was contradictory to what some religious experts were teaching at that time. In the first century world, there were many religious philosophers, even some in the church, teaching that physical desires are bad, and that the really mature people, those who have been sanctified and progressed spiritually, are those who have risen above physical desires. If you want to be super-spiritual, don’t eat food that you like, only water and vegetables. Don’t sleep on a comfortable bed, only on the floor. Don’t have sex with your spouse, become celibate, even if you are married. But Paul says that’s insane. God designed and created our bodies. A delicious taste when we eat, a comfortable bed when we sleep, and physical ecstasy during sex are gifts from him. He created those things for our enjoyment. We don’t honor God in a special way by maturing beyond them. Quite the opposite: we honor God in a special way as we recognize him and thank him while we enjoy the pleasures he created, knowing they are good gifts he chose to give us.

So if you are married, don’t try to be super-spiritual by avoiding sex with your spouse. Recognize sex is a gift God gave us to be enjoyed with our spouses. Also recognize we have a spiritual enemy who is trying to destroy our lives and tear apart our marriages; tempting us to pursue sexuality outside of marriage is one of his most powerful weapons against us. 1 Corinthians 7:5 says if you haven’t been together in a while, “come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.” How many marriages do you know that Satan has destroyed by getting a foothold in this area? This does not mean that if a husband or a wife is unfaithful that it is their spouse's fault. Each man and woman must lead themselves well and be accountable to God for their own actions. However, this is just a recognition of reality: when a couple has a frequent, passionate, exciting sex life, the power of sexual temptation outside of marriage dies down exponentially. So again, for clarity: husbands and wives should be faithful to God and faithful to their spouses no matter what, but that is much easier to do when husbands and wives are committed to being together frequently.

Once Keren and I were at the house getting ready to go on a date. We had a teenage babysitter at our house. Keren needed to feed one of our children before we left, so she and I were in the nursery. While Keren was feeding her, I started talking about how it had been a while since we had been on a date. We hadn’t really had enough time to talk with one another and connect emotionally and get on the same page about all these plans we were making and things we were doing. As a joke I said, “There are so many things we have to do better, but it all starts with having more sex.” Keren sighed and rolled her eyes. We looked at one another, then we looked across the room at the exact same time—and realized the baby monitor was on and our teenage babysitter heard the entire conversation. Her parents have not let her come back.

There is an important point behind that story because this is one of those passages that could easily be misused in a manipulative, controlling way in a marriage, which is not God’s intent. We have to be sure

that we are reading our own mail, not our spouse's mail, meaning that when we read this passage, we need to focus first and foremost on how it applies to us, not the person we are married to. I need to say, "God's Word tells me that my body belongs to my wife, so my focus needs to be on how I can serve her, not on how she can serve me." I can imagine a scenario where a husband says to his wife, "I think we should put some Scriptures up around our house." She says, "Sure, what did you have in mind?" "Maybe at the front door we could put Joshua 24:15, 'As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.'" "Ok. That sounds good." "In the living room we could put Psalm 133:1, 'How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity!'" "OK. That sounds good." "And I was thinking in the bedroom we could put 1 Corinthians 7, 'Do not deprive each other!'" That's not how it's supposed to work. We have to use Scripture for our own sanctification, not to manipulate other people to serve us.

Each person in the marriage needs to be reading their own mail, not their spouse's. A husband needs to read this and say: "My body doesn't belong only to me, but also to my spouse, so I need to use my body to serve and bless her." He should not say, "My wife's body doesn't belong to her alone but to me also, so she needs to use her body to serve and bless me." If each person is focused on what God says to them, things go well. But if you start demanding things of your spouse, things could take an ugly turn. The physical element is highlighted here, and it is obviously important, but unity is holistic. It's not just physical, but emotional and spiritual as well.

Whenever I am doing marriage counseling or pre-marital counseling, I encourage couples to find a way, every single day, to connect emotionally, connect spiritually, and connect physically. Emotional connection happens when you spend time talking with one another and sharing what's really going on in your hearts and minds: what are you excited about, what are you concerned about, what are you dreaming of and hopeful for? Connecting spiritually happens when you pray together, when you come to church together and talk about what you learned, when you serve together, when you talk about what God is teaching you. Connecting physically means that in some way or another, your bodies are coming together. That might mean holding hands as you watch a show together. It might mean cuddling as you fall asleep, even if that means it's going to take longer to fall asleep. On a regular basis it means having sex with one another. The idea here is using your body to serve your spouse by prioritizing unity with them in a holistic way.

And that's key, especially when physical intimacy isn't possible. You might be separated by travel, there might be a health condition, your wife may have just delivered a baby, you might have brokenness and pain from past trauma that needs to be healed. This passage specifically says there are times that a couple could abstain from sex to be more devoted to God in prayer. Do you married couples do that? Husbands, let me ask you: has your wife ever said, "Honey, I really want to be with you tonight," and you said, "Sweetheart, I so appreciate that sentiment, but I think it would be better if we just prayed instead." Of course you haven't!

Again, physical unity is important. But encompassing unity is the goal. God doesn't want married couples to become roommates, where you are so consumed with your job and the kids and cleaning and chores that you don't make unity a priority. Sometimes people talk about falling out of love. What usually happens is they fall out of trying. Your romance with your spouse is like a fire. If you tend it and stoke it and constantly throw new logs on the fire, it's going to grow and grow and grow. If you ignore it for a long time, it'll die out. Don't let the intimacy, the passion, the unity in your marriage die out.

I was talking about this sermon with another pastor here on staff, and he said that every day he and his wife text one another, "What can I do to serve you today?" How practical and romantic and beautiful is that? My body is not my own. It belongs to you. How can I serve you? A posture like that in marriage makes not only for a God-honoring marriage, but a remarkably joyful marriage!

That's the first passage, but there are two more. Here is the next one:

To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife. To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord): If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. But if the unbeliever leaves, let it be so. The brother or the sister is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace. How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife? (1 Corinthians 7:10-16)

As in the previous passage, there are many fascinating and counter-cultural elements to what Paul says about marriage in these verses. In the previous verses, we learned *if you are married your body is not your own*. In these verses we learn *if you are married, your future is not your own*. If you are married, you have an obligation to your spouse for as long as you both shall live. Maybe your marriage isn't as good as you thought it was going to be. Maybe you met someone at work or rekindled an old fling from college on Facebook and are thinking about leaving your spouse and marrying that person. Paul says if you are a Christian, that is not an option. Remember the words of Jesus in Matthew 19:9: "I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery." The courthouse might tell you that you can divorce and marry someone else, but God says you can't. It's adultery. Plain and simple. You promised to love this person for better or worse, richer or poorer, in sickness and in health for as long as you both shall live. You made the promise in the sight of God. It is a sacred, holy, permanent covenant.

If the key takeaway from these verses is *if you are married your future is not your own*, the application is *therefore be faithfully devoted to your spouse*. Don't leave them; stay together. That's the ideal.

But then there are two subpoints: what happens if a divorce does take place and what happens in the case of a spouse who is a non-believer? In the first situation, let's look again at 7:10-11: "To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband." So if a divorce does occur, what is the counsel? Remain unmarried or be reconciled. Again, the court might say you are single and can marry again, but God still sees you as married, so if you want to marry again the only person you can get married to is your original spouse.

Sadly, as a pastor I have witnessed a number of couples divorce for a variety of different reasons: an addiction that consumed a person's entire life, a spouse coming out as homosexual, infidelity, you name it. When I have the chance to connect with those couples I take them to this passage, as well as others, and say, "Even though you are divorced, the next step is not to start dating and marry someone else, but to remain single and hold out hope that God will do a miraculous redemptive work and repair this marriage." The only time I encourage people to marry someone else is if their original spouse marries someone else first, thus making reconciliation no longer an option. When people hear this teaching, they usually respond the exact same way people responded to Jesus when he gave it: that's really challenging, that's so restrictive. And the truth is, it is challenging. It is restrictive. God places such a value and priority on the covenant of marriage that it has an exclusive, lifelong element to it.

I know a number of couples, I have specific names and faces in mind, who were in a place in their marriages where they thought they had no hope. They either planned to divorce or actually went ahead with their divorce. They assumed things were irreparable. But instead of one or both of them pursuing another relationship, they were patient, they prayed, they held out hope, and God did a miraculous work. Hearts were changed. Bridges were built. Their marriages were restored. The gospel was on display in their relationships. And this is so key: that reconciliation was possible because neither started dating or married someone else after the separation. Their singleness after the separation was a sign that they were holding out hope and allowing the space for redemption.

So that's the first subpoint: what happens if you do divorce. The second subpoint is what happens if your spouse is a non-believer. Some in Corinth apparently assumed that meant you should go ahead and divorce, but Paul says that's not the case. He says as long as your non-believing spouse is willing to be married to you, you should stay married to them. The rationale is three-fold: (1) It is still important to keep your life-long promise and honor your life-long covenant. Your becoming a Christian or their leaving the faith may make things very difficult, but it does not nullify the promise or covenant you made. (2) A believing spouse may very well have a saving influence on a non-believing spouse. If you divorce, the chance of them being saved through your witness is next to zero. If you stay engaged in your marriage and you are a living example of the love, grace, and kindness of Christ to your spouse, if they see the transformation the gospel makes in your life, the chances of them being saved increases exponentially. (3) You can have a Christian influence on your children. It's far more beneficial for children to be raised in a home with both mom and dad, even if only one is a believer, than to be separated into different homes and experience the brokenness and heartache of divorce. That doesn't set them up for the highest likelihood of becoming Christians themselves.

Our culture says let's make divorce quick and easy. I was visiting a different city recently and I saw a billboard for a \$300 divorce. God's words say divorce isn't about the court system and paperwork and dividing assets; it's about pulling apart a one-flesh union that God himself established. Our assumption should always be lifelong devotion to our spouse and only under the most extreme circumstances should anything else ever be considered. However, sometimes those extreme situations happen. Maybe some people here today are such circumstances. Maybe there has been serial adultery in your marriage, or domestic violence in your home, or constant criminal activity in your home. If that is the case, please, reach out to one of the pastors or leaders in our church, or if you go to a different church, connect with the leaders at your church. You are not alone! You need someone to walk with you in this season and help you discern the most God-honoring choices you can make.

There is one more section we are going to look at.

What I mean, brothers and sisters, is that the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they do not; those who mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they were not; those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep; those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away. (1 Corinthians 7:29-31)

I love the wisdom that Paul is unpacking for us here. In the previous sections we learned, *if you are married your body is not your own*, and *if you are married, your future is not your own*. In these verses we learn *if you are married, your marriage is not your own*. In other words, the purpose of your marriage transcends you and your spouse, you and your family, you and your household. Look again at 7:29—“The time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they do not!” How can Paul say that? How can he say in Ephesians 5 that husbands have to love their wives and lay their lives down for their wives and earlier in this chapter say that a husband's body belongs to his wife and then say in this verse

live as if you don't have a wife? This verse provides necessary balance to the other verses. If you only looked at the other verses, you might think that Christians should be consumed by their marriages and spend every available resource to strengthen and enrich their marriages. But Paul says the time is short. He says the kingdom of God is at hand. Jesus suffered for our sins on the cross and has risen from the dead. Everyone everywhere needs to hear about this. Life and death, heaven and hell and eternity are at stake. In other words, as important as your marriage is, there is something even more important than your marriage. The main idea is *if you are married, your marriage is not your own*, and the application is *advance the kingdom of God with your spouse*. This needs to be the purpose of your marriage. Not just romance and companionship, kids and grandkids, shared interests and vacations, but advancing the kingdom of God together.

Imagine if we were living in Ukraine right now, with the Russian army representing an existential threat: soldiers encroaching at the border, missiles landing all around us, neighborhoods being bombed, casualties stacking up by the thousands. If that were our present reality, would you be taking two-hour walks with your spouse every night, watching the sun set and the stars come out? Would you do a date night every week and a couple's getaway a few times a year? Probably not! You would still tend to your marriage and invest in your marriage, but you'd also be so focused on the war and winning the war that you couldn't afford to be focused only on your marriage. You'd probably want to find a way that your marriage could be leveraged for the good of your country. Take that analogy and apply it to the kingdom of God. Right now, today, the kingdom of darkness is waging a war against the kingdom of light. Right now, Satan is trying to destroy people and God is trying to save them. Right now, there are countless people lost and broken, hurting and lonely, and so many of them need a loving, Christ-centered family to step up to the plate and be the presence of Jesus in their lives. Are you going to be inward-focused in your marriage and make everything about you and your family? Or are you going to be outward-focused in your marriage and serve other people?

Instead of just taking vacations for your enjoyment, what if every few years you took a mission trip? What if instead of going on a date night with only the two of you, you babysat for a young couple with small kids? You know they are stressed out to the max, so for your date night you watch their kids so they can go out, and instead of spending money going out to eat you give them money to dine out. There is a way to be together that's not about you but about other people. There is a way to invest into your marriage while still remembering your marriage is not your own but that your marriage, like everything else, belongs to God and is supposed to be used for him and for his glory.

Married couples, consider this question: how much further advanced is God's kingdom because of your marriage? How many younger couples have been blessed by your mentorship and hospitality? How many needs of the church have been met by you serving together? How many meals have been provided to the hungry? How many neighbors have you shared the gospel with? If the answer to all those questions is a lot—wonderful! Keep up the good work by God's strength and for God's glory. But if hearing that question stings a bit because the honest answer is, "Not very much" or "Not very much recently," it's time, in humility, to pray and ask God to make your marriage about more than only the two of you, and more than only your kids and family and people with your last name, but about Jesus Christ. It was Jesus who said, "Seek first God's kingdom and God's righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." That's not only true for us as individuals. It's true for us in marriage.