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Title: HONORING MARRIAGE & SINGLENESS

Text: 1 Corinthians 7:1-9 (NIV)

“Now for the matters you wrote about: It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman. ²But since sexual immorality is occurring, each man should have sexual relations with his own wife, and each woman with her own husband. ³The husband should fulfil his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. ⁴The 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. ⁵Do 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. ⁶I say this as a concession, not as a command. ⁷I wish that all of you were as I am. But each of you has your own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that. ⁸Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: it is good for them to stay unmarried, as I do. ⁹But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion.”

Before we look specifically at these nine verses, I want to share with you three errors that are commonly practiced regarding a passage like 1 Corinthians 7. 1. One error that is practiced is to AVOID THE SUBJECT ALTOGETHER. That is the error of being silent when the Bible clearly speaks on a matter. C.S. Lewis said, “When the devil sends error into the world, he also sends it in pairs” – two opposite extremes. One way that he sends error into the world regarding sexual matters is to focus one’s attention so dominantly on them that they’re unable to function or to think of anything else. Obviously, we could focus on sexual matters (or any topic) too much. Another error, on the other side, equally as bad, is to act as though God did not create us with bodies – to be silent when the Word speaks. One of the advantages of expository preaching is ultimately, by preaching systematically through the Scripture, the whole counsel of God is declared to the whole people of God. Paul had been sent a letter by the Corinthians, and here he began to answer questions that they had asked in their letter. In the first 6 chapters, he deals with concerns that are on his heart that they hadn’t necessarily asked him about. But... Whenever he used the phrase in Corinthians “Now concerning...,” it was in response to their letter where they asked the Apostle Paul about SEX & MARRIAGE. So, chapter 7 answers and addresses those questions. In chapter 8, people have asked him about FOOD OFFERED TO IDOLS. He answers that question there. In chapter 12, others have asked him questions about SPIRITUAL GIFTS. He answers that question. In chapter 16, some asked about THE COLLECTION FOR THE SAINTS, and he answers that question. Paul is not at all hesitant, in chapter 7, to openly share an answer with the entire congregation regarding sex and marriage – a mixed multitude of men and women and young people and children. Therefore, Scripture is NOT silent on matters which sometimes we might be. 2. A second thing I think we ought to realize, in looking at a passage like 1 Corinthians 7, is the FALSE idea of believing that SEXUAL FREEDOM IS SATAN’S IDEA. We have been sold a bill of goods by the world, that real freedom comes in throwing aside the restraints that God has established, or that real freedom is found outside of marriage. We recognize in going back to the Scripture – Genesis 1:31 and 2:25 – that God created man and woman, male and female, He created them, and He said that His creation was good. The original human family, Adam and Eve, are described as both being naked before God and not ashamed. God saw to it that, among the joys that He would give to humanity, there would be the joy of sexual freedom, but God’s design comes within the perimeter of marriage. C.S. Lewis so aptly put it this way in his book *The Screwtape Letters*. (BTW – There are those that hold that the *Screwtape Letters* are a must read for any Christian.) Screwtape is a senior tempter in Hell, who sends out letters of advice to a junior tempter, his nephew, Wormwood, on how to work on the human race, specifically, the particular person who Wormwood has been assigned to. One of the classic pieces of advice that Screwtape writes to Wormwood is as follows, “Never forget that when we are dealing with any pleasure in its healthy and normal and satisfying form, we are, in a sense, on the enemy’s – God’s – ground. Screwtape said, “I know we have won many a soul through pleasure. All the same, it is His (God’s) invention, not ours. He (God) made the

pleasures. All our research so far has not enabled us to produce one. All we can do is encourage the human to take the pleasures which our enemy, God, has produced in times or ways or degrees which he has forbidden.” An incredible admission on Hell’s part that they haven’t invented one pleasure yet. Indeed, that bears witness to the Scripture, *“At His right hand are pleasures forevermore”* (Psalm 16:11). 3. A third idea that is in error, regarding a passage like 1 Corinthians 7, is the idea which subtly (and sometimes very overtly) UNDERMINES PAUL’S AUTHORITY TO SPEAK AS AN APOSTLE OF CHRIST. Basically, Paul has gotten bad press on this passage on two charges, neither of which is justifiable, as we’ll see. One charge against Paul is that he is a bachelor. The big question then is – What right does a bachelor have to speak in respect to marriage? A second charge against the Apostle is that he has a very low opinion of marriage. He seems to be saying here, according to a surface reading of the passage, that the ONLY reason to get married is if you don’t have self-control. As to the FIRST charge, that Paul is a bachelor, it may very well be that he was a bachelor all his life. It may very well be that Paul, at the time of the writing of Corinthians, was unmarried, but at an earlier time had been married. It’s very possible, according to Acts 26:10, that Paul was a member of the Sanhedrin. It says that he cast his vote against Christians that were sentenced to death. We know that casting votes was a function of people that belonged to the Sanhedrin. To be a member of the Sanhedrin, you had to be married. If Paul WAS a member of the Sanhedrin, then at one time he would have been married. It may have been that he was married, and his wife died. It may have been that his wife abandoned him when he became a Christian. In Philippians 3:8, Paul says he suffered for Christ’s sake the loss of all things. I don’t know whether he was married or not, but the fact that he is a bachelor really does NOT disqualify him from speaking authoritatively as an apostle of Christ. After all, JESUS HIMSELF was a bachelor. As to the second charge, that Paul had a low view of marriage, we must remember that in 1 Corinthians 7 he is NOT giving an exposition on the totality of marriage. Rather, he is responding to specific questions which have been raised within the Corinthian congregation. Questions like, “Is it right for a person to get married?” “What part does the sexual union have in a marriage relationship?” There were those in Corinth that were saying it had no part at all. There ought to simply be spiritual or platonic marriages. Anything other than that is an affront against God. Paul is having to respond to this very specific thing. If you want to know his total view on marriage, then look at Ephesians 5, where he compares the role of the husband and wife in marriage to the role of Christ in the church. The bride and the bridegroom. Yesterday I performed a wedding at Hagerstown’s City Park and shared from a writing of Paul – part of 1 Corinthians chapter 13. This is perhaps the most incredible writing and analogy any man has ever written. Chapter 13 tells us that Paul, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, understood a great deal about love. The view that he holds a low view of marriage can be put to rest as we seriously look at the passage before us today. In these nine verses, Paul is giving counsel to the married AND the unmarried person.

1. The first thing he is saying is that **THE CHRISTIAN IS FREE NOT TO MARRY**. He writes *“Now for the matters you wrote about. It is good for a man not to marry”* (v. 1). Or *“It’s good for a woman not to marry.”* What is the meaning of this, “it’s good NOT to marry.” Does this mean that marriage is SECOND best? Is Paul saying it’s better not to marry, but if you’ve got to go ahead and get married, take God’s second best for your life and get married? Note that Paul is NOT setting up a comparison of marriage OR singleness here. Rather Paul is responding to a traditional viewpoint among some of the Jewish Christian believers, who held that the SINGLE state was a LOWER state of life than the MARRIED life, BUT... He’s saying “That’s NOT true AT ALL. It is good.” That is, it is proper. It is all right. It is permissible. It is OK for a person to remain single. There is no obligation that can or should be put upon a single person for remaining single. You should NOT be given to push a single person to become married. If they want to be married, I suppose you may help. The King James has the phrase, “it’s good for a man NOT to touch a woman.” Some have taken that so far as to say he shouldn’t even shake hands or touch the shoulder of a woman or anything like that. Paul means something deeper by that, as in the modern translation, “It’s good for a man not to marry.” What Paul is doing in this passage is making an affirmation – the single person is NOT a SPARE. Years ago, in one of the churches I served, there was a class for young married people and for single adults who were through college but who were not yet married. The class was called “Pairs and Spares.” It being understood that, if you were single, you were the “spare,” the half that

was looking around for your other half. The viewpoint has sometimes prevailed that, if you have reached your late twenties and you are not yet married, there must be something drastically wrong with you. That was the JEWISH view of Paul's day. Marriage was seen as a duty. So much so, that if a man had not married by the age of twenty, he was considered by many rabbis to have sinned. One rabbi said, "He who has no wife is no man." Paul, in this passage, puts down the FALSE superiority of the married person who looks down upon the unmarried person as being some lesser creature. He says, "NOT AT ALL. It is GOOD for a person, a man or a woman, not to marry. There is no sin attached to that at all. You can be a complete person and be a single person." That is a critical affirmation. By the way, it also ought to be noted parenthetically here that Paul nowhere tells unmarried women that, in the event they don't get married, they need a "covering." They don't need some male who will be the covering for them. Without getting into the whole realm of this subject, it should be noted that the word "covering" in its original meaning means "to atone." The Hebrew word "atone" means "to cover." The ONLY one who can ever really cover us is Jesus Christ and His shed blood on the cross. Of course, outside of that, we're called to appropriate proper relationships among one another, but the concept of a single woman needing to be covered by someone else is simply an idea that is really foreign to the Scripture. What is Paul saying here? He's saying that A CHRISTIAN IS FREE NOT TO MARRY.

2. The second thing he is saying, and an important thing, is that **WHETHER OR NOT YOU MARRY SHOULD DEPEND UPON THE GIFT THAT YOU HAVE RECEIVED FROM GOD.** Verse 7 says, "*I wish that all men [all people] were as I am, but each man has his own gift from God. One has this gift, another has that.*" Paul recognizes something called *charisma*, a spiritual gift. You've likely heard the word *charisma* or *charismatic*. We Pentecostals often think of *charismatic* as something related to speaking in tongues or prophesying or healing or the like. Paul uses that same word *charisma* which, in the New Testament, is never used in describing the gift of one person to another but is ALWAYS used in describing THE GIFTS OF GOD TO HIS PEOPLE. It's a gift of grace. It's a gift of a SUPERIOR to an inferior. Paul uses that same word – *charisma* – here and says, you have received a *charisma*. You have received the charisma OF BEING SINGLE OR... You have received the charisma OF BEING MARRIED. In either event, you are *charismatic*. What Paul is saying here is that the desire to marry and to have sexual union is a gift of God's grace. On the other hand, the desire to remain single to have more time and mobility to serve the Lord's work, is ALSO a gift of God's grace. AND... God gives HIS gifts AS HE WILLS. Some have been given this gift and some have been given that. How then do you know which gift you have? Paul asks, "are you continually tempted by sexual immorality?" Do you find, in your life, there is a drive which leads you to be married – so very deeply that there's no way you can lay aside that drive? In other words, there should be a recognition on your part that God has put grace in your life, a special grace which is meant to be completed and fulfilled by marriage. Paul does not chastise people who have this strong desire with guilt. He does not say, "Exercise more control. You've sinned." Or something like that. NO! (That is NOT to negate the fruit of the Spirit called self-control.) He says, "God made you this way, and the normal channel, therefore, that God wants you to take is to be married." *Phillips* (Translation) translates chapter 7:9 very expressively – and I think rightly – when he says, "*I think it is far better for those to be married than to be tortured by unsatisfied desire.*" What did the old commentators say three or four hundred years ago. It's a little bit different than the modern writers. One such writer, Matthew Henry, in his commentary on this passage, has a fascinating perceptive spiritual comment on 7:9. He says, "Persons expose themselves to great danger by attempting to perform what is above their strength. At the same time, not bound upon them by any law of God. If they abstain from lawful enjoyment, they may be ensnared into unlawful ones. The remedies God has provided against sinful inclinations are certainly best." In other words, what Paul and Matthew Henry were saying here is that no person should deliberately try to lead a way of life which is going to surround them with temptations greater than their power to deal with. Paul, on the other hand, DOES NOT SAY that a spouse should simply be chosen to legalize co-habitation. What he IS saying to us is, "Recognize your gift from God. The strong desire for marriage is God's gift to you," BUT... On the other hand, Paul does NOT say, "Find the first person available and marry them." To paraphrase another Scripture – "*Lay hands on no one suddenly*" (1 Timothy 5:22). We are to test out the will of God – by PRAYER, by OBSERVATION of another person's life,

and by the inward PROMPTING OF THE SPIRIT. Take your time. Being married – selecting a spouse is the most important decision, outside of accepting Christ into your life, that you will ever make. If you are not going to be married, that obviously will not be as important a decision. There will be other things that God will put before you to choose. But in such a situation, we need to sanctify it by prayer, by observation of the life of the person we are marrying, to test out whether this is of the Lord or not, and by the inward prompting of the Spirit. It is good counsel for young people to begin praying now for the Lord to have His will in their lives for a life partner. If you sense, in your life, that God has placed in you the gift of wanting to be married, the gift of marriage, then begin asking the Lord to direct you. Looking back on my younger years, I knew that I wanted to be married. I don't think I ever had a desire for the single life and don't today. Maybe I got that from my dad. He told me that if mom passed first, he would be looking for a wife at her funeral. He clarified that he didn't mean any disrespect to my mother. Rather he loved married life so much that he couldn't imagine NOT being married. AND NO – I don't really think he would have been looking for a wife at mom's funeral. (God took care of that, my dad passed away first.) I can remember that in sermons on the Lord's return, the only thing wrong if the Lord came back too quickly, was that I might not meet "this" girl that I wanted to marry. We need to remember that the same apostle who wrote 1 Corinthians 7 also wrote 1 Corinthians 13, and that we ought to resist those who unfairly twist this Scripture, especially verse 9, to say that Paul is in favor of simply selecting a person based on a need in your own life. I don't believe he's saying that at all. He's saying there's a special gift and that gift then leads you to begin to search for that person that God is calling you to. By the way, Paul not only does not say that a spouse should be chosen simply to legalize cohabitation. He ALSO doesn't say that all people who remain single have a good reason. Not all single people are single because they have charisma of singleness. Some are single because they may dread responsibility. Others are single because they prefer casual relationships. Some are single because they are selfish. Others, because they like the freedom of the single life. Others, because they are yet AWAITING GOD'S TIME to reveal to them who their partner is going to be. Paul, positively and expressively, declines to judge others by himself or himself by others. That's the meaning of verse 6, *"I say this by way of concession."* That is, it is NOT a command to marry or to stay single. He will not judge anyone else by himself nor let anyone else judge him by what he's doing. EVERY person must do what's best for themselves, according to their *charisma*. According to THEIR gift of grace.

3. Then, in this passage, Paul deals with another topic. That is the topic that **MARRIAGE BRINGS RESPONSIBILITY (v. 2-5)**. He says that it, FIRST of all, brings the responsibility of FIDELITY. *"Now, since there is so much immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband."* He is ruling out such things as POLYGAMY in this passage – one husband and many wives. He's ruling out, in some cultures (Tibet) the possibility of ONE WIFE and MANY HUSBANDS. He is ruling out ADULTERY. He is saying that there is responsibility of fidelity and total loyalty to one another. The SECOND thing he is saying about the responsibility of marriage is that there is a responsibility of a DEBT DUE (v. 3-5). There were evidently some in Corinth that felt that marriage could be simply spiritual and NOT PHYSICAL. That it should be platonic – affectionate yet not sexual. Paul counters this by saying in verse 3, that the husband owes a debt to his wife and the wife to her husband. "Debt" is the actual word that is employed. By the way, Paul has been accused of all kinds of things, including being a woman-hater and of speaking in favor of male dominance and superiority and all these kinds of things. It ought to be noted here that, in verse 3, he regards the obligation as a TWO-WAY Street. Enjoyment is a two-way street. The husband owes a debt to his wife, AND... The wife owes a debt to her husband. In verse 4, Paul says that the wife does not have power or authority over her own body, but her husband. Likewise, the SAME applies to the husband. And in verse 5, he says, *"Do not steal from one another."* That's a very precise term, "Do not steal" or "do not defraud one another except by..." and the word he uses in the Greek is *symphony*. Agreement. A "symphony" is something where the notes resonate together in a chorus that has the beauty of AGREEMENT. Paul, in this passage, is NOT saying to a married couple, "Demand your rights of one another." Instead, what he is saying to a married couple is, "Meet your responsibilities one to another." These are IMPORTANT responsibilities. God created responsibilities and, therefore, they are to be met. Some CONCLUSIONS can be drawn from these responsibilities of a debt due.

ONE very important conclusion is that Paul bases the physical relationship of husband and wife on a basis OTHER THAN simply having children or procreation. He bases it upon mutual dependence for fulfillment. I think this is an important point for those in our day or past days who taught that every act of marriage between husband and wife should be with the intent of bearing a child, for that union to have God's blessing. That is precisely ABSENT from Paul's teaching. Instead, he treats marital union as an obligation that is due. The SECOND thing that flows, as a conclusion, is that the husband or the wife is NOT free to use affection as a means of REWARD or PUNISHMENT to the other partner. Ranking at the top of the list of the most common problems in a marriage relationship is the use of affection as a means of reward or punishment. Paul indicates that the giving of marital affection must NOT spring from a spirit which says, "I'll do you a favor." BUT... It must spring from the gentle humility of grace that says, "I have this responsibility, I owe you this debt." The THIRD thing that Paul is saying here about sexuality within marriage is that it is NOT a necessary evil to be put up with or tolerated, but it is indeed a gift from God. A special gift of God's grace. The Song of Solomon, of course, celebrates it. For years, some Christians have been uneasy about the Song of Solomon – which is a song expressing the joy of marital love – and said, "This may not really refer to an honest love between husband and wife. Rather, it must simply refer to the love of Christ for His church." Therefore, the Song of Solomon has been allegorized out of its original meaning. Granted, where there is a healthy relationship between husband and wife, it models the healthy relationship Christ has with His church. In that sense, therefore, the Song of Solomon is a legitimate analogy of the love Christ has for His bride – us, the church. At the same time, though, God chose, within the Scriptures, to place a hymn, a poem of marriage celebration, to indicate His stamp of approval upon the gift which God Himself has created. SEXUALITY WITHIN MARRIAGE, therefore, is a gift of God, freely given to us by God, given freely to one another, a gift of grace. Paul, then, goes on to say, as ANOTHER logical outcome, that abstaining from marital affection is subject to three conditions. 1. It must be by MUTUAL AGREEMENT. It cannot be unilateral, where one person feels one way and another person feels another way. Rather, it must be by mutual agreement. 2. Abstinence must be for A GOOD CAUSE, such as PRAYER, or maybe in other cases, we can add "such as SICKNESS," or, "SEPARATION because of a job or military service or something like that." 3. Paul says, again "It must be TEMPORARY." Failure to abide by these three conditions that Paul sets down may result in one or both marriage partners having to go through extraordinary and unnecessary temptation. Thus, Paul is saying that abstaining from a relationship in marriage is both selfish and dangerous, and he gives apostolic counsel against it.

CONCLUSION. How do we take all this (in these 9 verses) and apply it to our lives, whether we are married or single? Many things have found their application, simply by looking at the text. ILLUSTRATION – On the back wall of the sanctuary are a couple of little dials which hold two things in them – a THERMOMETER and a THERMOSTAT. (The thermometer is on the bottom half and the top holds the thermostat.) In some homes, these two instruments are separated one from another. We all know what the thermometer is for, right? A thermometer simply reports back the temperature of the room. If the temperature is very warm, the thermometer will tell you. If the temperature is very cold, the thermometer will tell you. Again, the thermometer simply reads back to you the existing temperature of that room. NOT SO with the THERMOSTAT, however. The thermostat is a mechanism whereby you CHANGE THE TEMPERATURE. If the temperature is going to change in a room, the thermostat will always change BEFORE the thermometer changes. If the room temperature is 70 degrees and you want it to be 74, you've got to turn the thermostat to 74, AND... Then WAIT for a while for the temperature of the thermometer to show the room is at 74. This, to me, is a critical analogy as it relates both to marriage and as it relates to our walk with God. You cannot successfully maintain a relationship if it is the thermometer kind. When things are great with you, then things are great with me in return for you. If things are icy with you, then they're icy with me. I will simply feed back the emotional temperature that you are giving me. That is a death sentence for human relationships. You cannot respond from temperature to temperature. What Paul is saying, in this beautiful model of 1 Corinthians 7, is that there must be a willingness to live thermostatically. To respond, NOT as you have been responded to, if you have not been responded to in the way you want to be responded to. But... Instead, to respond by setting the

thermostat of your response at a level which is significantly higher than the temperature of the response that you've been getting. By living thermostatically, one gives oneself and one's spouse the opportunity for change. When you look at how God loves us, then this illustration becomes so beautiful – a revelation of God's grace. God does NOT love us like a thermometer. When I am really on fire for the Lord, the Lord doesn't look back and say, "Jim is doing pretty good today down there. I think I'll love him more." AND... When I'm really struggling and not on my best behavior or my attitude isn't so good, and I'm arguing with God about what I'm doing in life, God doesn't say, "Lloyd's got problems today. Let's turn the temperature of love down. Let's make him squirm. Let's not send him any grace today." No, if God loves us like a thermometer, we'd be in a lot of trouble. But He loves us thermostatically. He sets the degree of His love at a level that we can never come up to until we see Him face to face. He has purposed to love us, despite the original instance when we were yet in sin, Christ loved us. We were in sin and Christ died for us. That is love that is not reciprocal (setting the temperature at the same degree that you're getting), but it's love that is thermostatic. *"Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed upon us that we should be called the children of God"* (1 John 3:1). Look at the manner of love that God has given to us. He, therefore, loves us to a degree that wins our love. He does NOT say, "Love Me a little bit more and I'll love you a little bit more. Gradually, we'll get this thing worked out and we'll let our temperatures rise at the same time." NO! He starts with grace as an unconditional act. He loves us completely, wholly, no matter what our feelings may tell us at times or what false views of Scripture may tell us at times. Yet the fact remains that *"God so loved YOU" – "God so loved the world that He gave His only Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."* The love of God for you is fantastic. God has set His love at a level which then allows you to begin to respond. But... HE DOESN'T ALTER THAT LOVE. Hosea, in the Old Testament, is an incredible model of this, because Hosea is a story of a husband and wife. God does NOT tell Hosea to love his wife like a thermometer. He says to Hosea that he must love his wife like a THERMOSTAT. He must be faithful and loving to his wife, EVEN WHEN she has been unfaithful and unloving to him. Then God turns right around and uses that as a model for His own love for His people. *"How shall I forget you? How shall I cast you off?"* A beautiful model of love. May God help us in our interpersonal relationships to remember that part of living successfully for the Lord and part of the success in marriage is to pay attention to the thermostat rather than to the thermometer.

CLOSING PRAYER. Thank You, Lord, for giving us Your Word, which addresses so very clearly and specifically regarding the issues in life that we face. We do thank You, Lord, that there is no temptation in life that catches You by surprise. You have provided with every testing point a way of escape. We want to thank You, as individual people who bow before You now, for the special gifts of grace You've placed in our lives. We honor You and thank You for the gift of singleness AND the gift of marriage. BOTH come from You. We honor and recognize You in the giving of these gifts. We pray that, in the exercise of our gift that You have given, that there will be the freedom to develop that gift in Your way and in Your time. That we will not violate the gift in such a way that it ceases to bring us joy OR freedom. Lord, we pray especially for the young people and others in this congregation who sense in their own life a call to be married but have not yet come to that moment in life when they have made that choice and that decision. How beautiful Your Word is, which tells us to acknowledge You in all our ways and You will direct our path (Proverbs 3:6). If You have given us a gift, Lord, then You also will, in Your way and time, lead us to the enjoyment of that gift. We acknowledge Your direction in that area of our lives. We bring before you every single person and ask that they find their greatest joy in You and that you direct their steps according to Your gifting to each of them. We bring before You also, Lord Jesus, every marriage in this church family. We ask that each marriage would be what You have intended it to be. That each one would know the joy that You, the creative God, has given. That in all areas of the marital life, physically and spiritually and friendship-wise, there might be a real growing together in grace and in the love that belongs to us as Your children, that are in Christ Jesus. Now, Lord, we look to You for the application of these words, as we live out our lives in everyday terms, through the week and the days to come. May Your Word sustain us. May it always be food for our hearts. We ask in Jesus' name. AMEN.