

| 1 Corinthians |

Week 11 Scripture Guide | 1 Corinthians 7:1-5

Biblical Context

Paul has previously addressed the matters that had been reported about the Corinthian church (e.g. divisions, 1 Cor 1:11; and sexual immorality, 5:1), and now begins to directly address what the Corinthians wrote in their letter to him.¹ Chapters 5-7 concern sexual purity and Paul addresses extremes in beliefs regarding sexuality and the gospel. In chapter 6, Paul addressed Christians who are abusing their liberties and walking in sexual sin. The necessary response is to “flee sexual immorality” (1 Cor 6:18) and rather “glorify God in your body” (6:20) because our bodies are not our own, but are a temple of the Holy Spirit. What follows in chapter 7 concerns how to practically glorify God in the context of relationships—sex, marriage, and singleness. Paul opens this section addressing what the Corinthians have written to him: “It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with (ἅπτω, *haptō*, “touch”) a woman” (7:1).² In his previous interactions with the Corinthians Paul has already been addressing the need to abstain from sexual immorality. Paul, a single man (cf. 7:8), has denounced the Christian’s pursuit of *porneia* in his previous letter and some married Corinthians have concluded that they should denounce any form of sex.³ While some Corinthians were indulging themselves in sexual immorality because they viewed their spirituality as divested from the body (6:13) others had adopted the view that it was good to abstain from any kind of sexual relations, even within marriage, thus some married Corinthians deprived their spouses of sexual intimacy in pursuit of an ascetic ideal.⁴ In contrast to the sexual permissiveness of some, this is an expression of the Corinthians’ “spirituality” with its negative attitude toward the material world and the body.⁵ This is particularly heightened because some Corinthians had an over-realized eschatology—the view that the end had already come and they were “neither married nor given in marriage, but are like the angels” (Matt 22:30).

Rather than ascetically abstain from sexual relations within the marital covenant, Paul says that each man should “have” his own wife and likewise each woman her husband. This is not saying that every man should acquire a wife or every woman should acquire a husband (cf. 1 Cor 7:9, 27b, 38). In this instance he is addressing those already married.⁶ Rather, the word “have” (ἔχω, *echo*), in this context, is another euphemism for sexual relations (cf. 5:1) and each husband and wife should continue in relations with their spouse.⁷ The reason Paul cites for not abstaining from sexual relations within the marital covenant is because of *πορνείας* (*porneias*, pl. “sexual immoralities”).⁸ “Although the Greek word *porneia* can refer to any illicit sexual behavior, Paul may refer to prostitution here. Some female believers may have deprived their husbands of sexual relations. In response, these men sought out prostitutes.”⁹ Avoiding the pleasures of marital intercourse and limiting sex to the purposes of procreation could lead spouses to be tempted to find sexual fulfillment with other people. While Paul has urged the Corinthians to flee *porneia* (6:18), he also said to “glorify God in your body” (6:20). Paul is emphasizing the need to both avoid sexual immorality and therefore meet the appropriate, sexual needs of one’s spouse.

In 1 Cor 7:3-4, Paul elaborates on the injunction to “have one’s own spouse” in mutual sexual relations. This elaboration emphasizes two things—that sexual relations are a “due” in marriage, and that one’s body belongs

¹ Beginning in 1 Corinthians 7, Paul addresses several issues brought up in the Corinthians’ letter identified with the word *περί* (*peri*, “concerning”)—marriage (7:1); virgins (7:25); food sacrificed to idols (8:1, [8:4]); spiritual gifts (12:1); and money he was collecting for Jerusalem Christians (16:1, 12).

² Scholarly consensus is that Paul is quoting yet another Corinthian maxim (cf. 1 Cor 6:12, 13) that was being used to promote a form of ascetic ideal (cf. Col 2:21), and not his own stance on the matter. Previous interpretation understands this as Paul’s position saying, “it is good not to marry/to remain celibate.” This is not what Paul is saying, here. He elsewhere points out the benefits of singleness (cf. 1 Cor 7:8, 32-35). The phrase “to touch a woman” (γυναῖκος...ἅπτεισθαι; *gynaikos...haptesthai*) appears approximately 25 times in extra-biblical Greek manuscripts and carries the weight of “sexual relations.”

³ For the unmarried, Paul affirms celibacy as a divine gift (1 Cor 7:7).

⁴ Asceticism is defined as “severe self-discipline and avoidance of all forms of indulgence, typically for religious reasons.”

⁵ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, ed. Ned B. Stonehouse et al., Revised Edition., *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 307.

⁶ Paul would have used the word *γαμέω* (*gameō*) as in 1 Cor 7:9 if he was speaking of getting married or *λαμβάνω* (*lambanō*) for “take a wife.”

⁷ Engaging with one’s spouse for pleasure and not just procreation is something idealized in the Song of Solomon.

⁸ The word is plural and implies the myriad of sexual sins actively taking place in the Corinthian culture and church, not just those that are anticipated.

⁹ John D. Barry et al., *Faithlife Study Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012, 2016), 1 Cor 7:2. The preceding context is about prostitution.

fully to their spouse. He writes, “Let the husband repay (*ἀποδίδωμι*, *apodidōmi*) what is due (*ὀφειλή*, *opheile*) his wife and likewise the wife to her husband.”¹⁰ The woman does not have authority (*ἐξουσιάζω*, *exousiadzō*) over her own body but also the man, likewise the man does not have authority over his own body, but also the woman” (7:3-4).¹¹ “The language of obligation...implies that married couples are indebted to one another sexually. Such language has often been found offensive, both by the ascetic (who sees abstinence as a higher good) and the ‘liberated’ person (who sees ‘obligation’ as a demeaning way to speak of such a relationship).”¹² Paul’s emphasis is on mutuality and not “you owe me” but rather, “I owe you.” In most cultures, including the church, sex is often viewed as the husband’s privilege and the wife’s obligation, but for Paul, the marriage bed is “both unitive and an affirmation that the two belong to one another in total mutuality.”¹³

Having affirmed the importance of maintaining sexual intimacy with one’s spouse as a guard against sexual immorality, Paul uses forceful language, “Do not deprive (*ἀποστερέω*, *apostrepeō*) one another...” (1 Cor 7:5). The word translated “deprive” is the same word used in 6:7-8 and means “to suffer loss by taking away through illicit means, rob, steal, defraud.” It is the same word used in Exo 21:10 (LXX) to prohibit the deprivation of sexual rights.¹⁴ In this context, as in Exodus 21, the point is that to refuse to have relations with one’s spouse is to withhold what is properly theirs.”¹⁵ Paul recognizes the inherent danger of depriving one’s spouse in this way—they may be tempted to find sexual fulfillment elsewhere. Thus, he gives a concession regarding abstinence in the context of marriage, “...except perhaps by agreement (*σύμφωνος*, *symphōnos*)¹⁶ for a limited time (*πρὸς καιρὸν*, *pros kairon*)...” (7:5).¹⁷ This is for the purpose that (*ἵνα*, *hina*) the couple can devote themselves to (undistracted) prayer but soon come together again. The prolonged lack of sexual intimacy in the context of marriage can be capitalized on and exacerbated by one’s lack of self control and thus pursuit of outside sexual fulfillment and release. This points to 6:12-16; defrauding a spouse of sexual intimacy could lead to *porneia* for fulfillment. While believers should flee sexual immorality of all kinds (6:18), we are also commanded to glorify God in our bodies. Married Christians glorify God by faithfully serving their spouses through consensual sexual intimacy.

Connection and Application

The Christians in Corinth were surrounded by a sexually charged culture and the church had many different reactions to the gospel when it came to sex. Some exploited their so called “liberty” and lived lives of sexual permissiveness and promiscuity (1 Cor 6:12-20), while others deprived themselves and their spouse to the point of risking temptation to sin. We also live in a sexually charged culture. God created sexual intimacy to be enjoyed in the context of marriage. To deprive one’s spouse for any reason other than by mutual agreement could be setting both up for moral failure and shame. While some Corinthians may have pursued prostitutes for brief gratification, our culture has *porneia* literally at our fingertips. We must flee *porneia* and glorify God in our bodies. A way to safeguard this in the context of marriage is to protect marital sanctity by regular pursuit of consensual sexual intimacy, spouses serving one another, glorifying God in their bodies in the context of the marital covenant.

¹⁰ *Apodidōmi* is translated as “re/pay,” “reward.” *Opheile* comes from the root *opheilō* (*opheilō*) and most often translated as “debt” or “what is owed.”

¹¹ Gnostics may have understood the idea that “the woman does not have authority over her own body...” along the lines of the physical life as “indifferent, unimportant, or ‘subjugated’ by the spiritually redeemed who live on a higher plane. But by adding the words *ἀλλὰ ὁ ἀνὴρ* (...but the man [has authority]) and *ἀλλὰ ἡ γυνή* (...but the woman [has authority]) Paul literally brings them down to earth about the value, importance, and obligations of bodily life.” Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000), 506. That culture viewed women as property. Saying a wife had authority over a husband’s body was countercultural.

¹² Fee, 310.

¹³ Fee, 311. Some have suggested that part of the mutual expectation of what was “due” went beyond merely sexual relations, but also included domestic obligations. Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000), 503–504. Cf. Exo 21:10.

¹⁴ Sexual intimacy is considered a “due” or “right” and together with “deprive” suggests the force of taking something that is not your own. To deprive one’s spouse of sexual intimacy is to rob, steal, or defraud them, relationally.

¹⁵ Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 282.

¹⁶ *Symphōnos*: “sounding together” (like “symphony”) and it comes with the weight of mutual verbalized agreement, not a unilateral decision.

¹⁷ This requires that the husband and wife can openly and honestly communicate about their sexual relationship.