

1 CORINTHIANS 7:1–2

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Brad Norman

Turn in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 7. Last week we finished looking at chapter 6, and so we're ready to start a new chapter. But we're not just starting a new chapter today. We're also starting a new section in the book. So far we've looked at two major sections, not including the introduction in the first nine verses of chapter 1. The first major section in this letter is focused on the need for church unity. It covers chapter 1 and verse 10 through the end of chapter 4. We saw that the Corinthian believers were divided into factions based on excessive loyalty to various Christian leaders. And so Paul told these people to get on the same page and remember that the gospel is the foundation of our faith.

The second major section in this letter is focused on the need for church purity, and it covers chapters 5 and 6. In chapter 5 we saw that Paul rebuked the Corinthian believers for tolerating a man who was committing incest with his stepmother. They needed to remove this man from the church both for his good and for their good as well. This action would motivate the man to repent and maintain the purity of the church. Then in the beginning of chapter 6 Paul dealt with the sin of Christians taking each other to civil court. Instead of taking their disputes before the unrighteous, they should have found a wise believer to serve as an arbitrator. So in chapter 5 the Corinthians were not judging the man who committed incest, and in the beginning of chapter 6 they were not serving as judges for their fellow believers when they had disputes with each other.

Then at the end of chapter 6 Paul returned to the topic of sexual immorality. In chapter 5 he addressed the sin of incest, and in chapter 6 he dealt with the sin of prostitution. In verses 12–13 he quoted the Corinthian believers a few times to correct their faulty thinking. Some of them thought that they could do whatever they wanted with their bodies because they didn't believe that their bodies would be raised from the dead. Then in verses 15–16 Paul asked the Corinthian believers some questions to help them realize how sinful it is to have sex with a prostitute. It involves joining our body to someone who's wicked and creating a union that's in direct competition with our union with Jesus. So in verse 18 Paul told us to run away from sexual immorality, and then he reminded us that our body is a temple of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit lives in us because we've been set free from slavery to sin by the blood of Jesus. So we should use our body to glorify God instead of committing sexual sin.

Now we're ready to begin studying the third major section in this letter, which is focused on the subject of marriage. So on the surface it seems like Paul wasn't shifting his focus very much. In the second section he talked a lot about improper sexual behavior, and now in the third section his focus is on the proper place for sexual intimacy. But there's another sense in which we have a major shift here in chapter

7. Earlier in this letter Paul was responding to reports that he received about the church. In chapter 1 and verse 11 he said, “For it has been reported to me about you, my brothers and sisters, by members of Chloe’s people, that there is rivalry among you.” Then in chapter 5 and verse 1 he said, “It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and the kind of sexual immorality that is not even tolerated among the Gentiles—a man is sleeping with his father’s wife.”

So the first two major sections in the book were based on reports that Paul received about the Corinthian church. But in chapter 7 he didn’t respond to a report that he received. Look at what he said in verse 1: “Now in response to the matters you wrote about: ‘It is good for a man not to use a woman for sex.’” So Paul made it very clear here that the Corinthian believers had written him a letter. Now we already know that Paul had previously written them a letter as well. In chapter 5 and verse 9 he said, “I wrote you in a letter not to associate with sexually immoral people.” But now we’re seeing that the Corinthian believers had apparently responded to Paul’s letter with one of their own. And now in chapter 7 Paul was responding to some matters that they wrote about in that letter.

But this isn’t the only place in 1 Corinthians where we see that Paul was responding to the Corinthian believers. Look at chapter 7 and verse 25: “Now about virgins: I have no command from the Lord, but I do give an opinion as one who by the Lord’s mercy is faithful.” Now Paul didn’t specifically say here that he was responding to the letter from the Corinthian believers. But he started this verse in exactly the same way that he started verse 1. The first two words in the Greek text are the same in both verses. They can be translated with the phrase “now about” or “now concerning.” The Christian Standard Bible is pretty literal in verse 25, but it’s not as literal in verse 1. More literal translations like the English Standard Version, the Legacy Standard Bible, and the New American Standard Bible all start verse 1 with the phrase “now concerning.”

So in chapter 7 and verse 25 Paul was pointing us back to verse 1 and adding a second response to the letter that the Corinthian believers wrote to him. Then he gave a third response in chapter 8 and verse 1. Look at what he wrote here: “Now about food sacrificed to idols: We know that ‘we all have knowledge.’ Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.” So we see those same two words here at the beginning of the verse that we saw in chapter 7 and verse 25. Then we see a similar phrase in chapter 12 and verse 1. Look at what Paul wrote here: “Now concerning spiritual gifts: brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be unaware.” This time the Christian Standard Bible has the phrase “now concerning” instead of the phrase “now about.” But in the Greek text we have the same two words that we saw in the earlier passages.

So we’ve seen the beginning of Paul’s first four responses to the letter from the Corinthian believers. But there are two more in chapter 16. In verse 1 he said, “Now about the collection for the saints: Do the same as I instructed the Galatian churches.” Then in verse 12 Paul said, “Now about our brother Apollos: I strongly urged him to come to you with the brothers, but he was not at all willing to come now. However, he will come when he has an opportunity.” So we’re going to see a total of six responses that Paul gave to the letter from the Corinthian believers. Apparently their letter was pretty substantial, but it also had some significant flaws. And so Paul spent a considerable amount of time correcting their thinking in chapters 7–16. They needed to change their views in a variety of areas.

So in chapters 1–6 Paul was responding to reports that he received about the Corinthian church. Then in chapters 7–16 he was responding to a letter from the Corinthian believers. And in chapter 7 and verses 1–24 his first response to their letter was focused on the topic of marriage. I think he chose to address this topic first because it flows very smoothly from chapters 5 and 6. Now the Christian Standard Bible has a footnote in verse 1 to notify us that some manuscripts or copies of the New Testament have the phrase “to me.” Now it’s quite obvious that the Corinthian believers had written this letter to Paul, but it’s very unlikely that he actually used this phrase. After all, it’s not found in the oldest and most reliable copies of the New Testament. That’s why it’s not included in any Bible major translation other than the King James Version the New King James Version, which are based on later copies of the New Testament and not the oldest ones.

Now let’s take a look at the beginning of Paul’s first response to the letter from the Corinthian believers. In verse 1 he said, “It is good for a man not to use a woman for sex.” Now this wording is not a very literal translation from the original Greek. The Christian Standard Bible has a footnote here that gives a more literal translation. It starts with the word “lit,” which is an abbreviation for the word “literal.” Then it says, “It is good for a man not to touch a woman.” In fact, that statement is exactly what we see in the Legacy Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible, which are pretty literal Bible translations. But on this occasion a literal translation is actually a bit misleading. It’s obvious from the context that the focus here is on a specific kind of touching. The word “touch” isn’t referring to casual physical contact like a handshake. Instead it’s referring to sexual contact.

We have another example of this usage in Proverbs 6. In this chapter Solomon was warning his son against the sin of adultery. And in verses 27–29 he talked about how there are consequences for committing this sin. Look at what he said in these verses: “Can a man embrace fire and his clothes not be burned? Can a man walk on burning coals without scorching his feet? So it is with the one who sleeps with another man’s wife; no one who touches her will go unpunished.” So it’s clear that Solomon wasn’t talking about casual physical contact here. He wasn’t telling his son that he would be punished if he accidentally bumped into a woman. He was talking about touching her in the sense of sleeping with her. The more literal translations actually have the statement “the one who goes in to his neighbor’s wife.” That’s a pretty straightforward reference to sexual intercourse.

So I think 1 Corinthians 7:1 is talking about the same kind of touching. And this view is supported by most Bible translations. They don’t have the word “touch” here like the Legacy Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible. Instead they have a reference to sexual relations. Even a literal Bible translation like the English Standard Version goes in this direction. Listen to what it says here: “It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.” And this exact statement is also found in the NET Bible and the New International Version. Now if you have the old edition of the New International Version, you’ll see something different here. That version says, “It is good for a man not to marry.” But that statement is going too far. The word “touch” never refers specifically to marriage. The updated New International Version is better here.

So the English Standard Version, the NET Bible, and the updated New International Version all say that

it's good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman. But it's very difficult to imagine Paul making this statement. After all, Genesis 2:18 says that "it is not good for the man to be alone." That's what God said right before he created the first woman and brought her to the first man. And Genesis 1:28 tells us that after God created the first man and woman, he told them to "be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, and subdue it." So it's obvious that God wanted Adam and Eve to have kids. And of course that wasn't going to happen unless they had sexual relations.

So why would Paul have said that it's good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman? It's very difficult to see how he could have made this statement. And so Bible scholars have proposed a helpful solution here. They have suggested that Paul was quoting a statement made by the Corinthian believers, and then he corrected it. This view works very well here, and there's good precedent for it. We've already see that this is exactly what Paul did in chapter 6 and verses 12–13. In the Christian Standard Bible and many other translations, there are several statements in those two verses that have quotation marks around them. Those quotation marks indicate that Paul was not telling us what he believed but what the Corinthians believed.

And if you look at chapter 7 and verse 1 in most modern Bible translations, you'll see quotation marks here as well. They're not used in the Legacy Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible, but you can find them in the Christian Standard Bible, the English Standard Version, the NET Bible, and the New International Version. But the Christian Standard Bible is a bit different from those other translations. The Christian Standard Bible says, "It is good for a man not to use a woman for sex." Now this statement is talking about sexual relations like the statement in the other translations. But this translation sounds like it's talking about some kind of sexual abuse. Or perhaps it's referring to the practice of going to a prostitute. But Paul would have agreed that it's not good for a man to do those things. And so it makes no sense that this statement would have been a quotation from the Corinthian believers. After all, Paul went on to correct this quotation, not to agree with it.

So I think it's more likely that the English Standard Version, the NET Bible, and the New International Version are on the right track here. The Corinthian believers were saying that it's a good thing in general for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman. In other words, they were advocating abstinence from sexual relations. And this view makes sense because abstinence is exactly what Paul went on to talk about in the next few verses. But this interpretation does seem to be at odds with what we learned about the Corinthian believers in chapter 6. At the end of the chapter Paul confronted them about going to prostitutes. But we shouldn't assume that all of them were struggling in this area. In fact, I think it's very likely that Paul was addressing mostly men in that passage. Throughout history men are usually the ones who go to prostitutes.

So now in chapter 7 I think Paul was addressing a different group of people in the Corinthian church. He was talking to people who didn't want to have sexual relations. Perhaps most of these people would have been women, but some of them may have been men as well. And the value of this view is that we can now understand why so many professing Christians were going to prostitutes in Corinth. If their spouses thought that they were supposed to abstain from sexual relations, then these people would have had a

harder time saying “no” to sexual temptation. I’m not saying that they weren’t responsible for their sin, but their spouses carried some blame for the situation as well.

And this is exactly where Paul went next in this passage. Look at what he wrote in verse 2: “But because sexual immorality is so common, each man should have sexual relations with his own wife, and each woman should have sexual relations with her own husband.” Notice that Paul started this verse with the word “but.” He was introducing a contrast with the previous verse. And this contrast is confirmation that he was quoting a flawed statement from the Corinthians in verse 1. If he was just giving his own statement in verse 1, then why would he contradict it in verse 2? It makes much more sense that he was quoting the Corinthians in verse 1 and then correcting their faulty view in verses 2 and following.

So let’s take a closer look at how Paul corrected the Corinthians in verse 2. He started by saying, “Because sexual immorality is so common.” But the Christian Standard Bible has a footnote here with a more literal translation. It says, “Because of immoralities.” That’s exactly what the NET Bible has. And the Legacy Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible are very similar. They have the phrase “because of sexual immoralities.” That’s because the Greek word here is “porneia,” which is the same word that we saw in chapter 6 and verses 13 and 18. In both of those places most translations have the phrase “sexual immorality.” It’s a reference to any kind of sexual behavior that’s outside a biblically-defined marriage. And notice that the word is in the plural here in chapter 7 and verse 2. I think Paul was stressing that there were many examples of sexual immorality taking place among the Corinthian believers.

So the Christian Standard Bible is not very literal at the beginning of verse 2, but it’s conveying the meaning of the original text pretty well. Sexual immorality was pretty common in Corinth, and many of the professing Christians there were indulging in it. So because of this serious problem, Paul gave some important instructions here. He said that “each man should have sexual relations with his own wife, and each woman should have sexual relations with her own husband.” So we have two statements here, and the second one is just like the first one except that some terms are replaced. The first one is talking about each man, and the second one is talking about each woman. The first one is talking about his own wife, and the second one is talking about her own husband. So what Paul said about one gender applies to the other gender as well.

Now we have the word “should” in each of these statements, and this word normally expresses obligation. And this idea is on the right track, but it’s not strong enough. In the original Greek there’s a command in both statements. Now usually commands are in the second person. For example, I might tell one of my kids to set the table. And that’s a second person command because the word “you” is implied. So a second person command is given directly to the listener or the reader. But these commands in verse 2 are in the third person, and we don’t normally use third person commands in English. Here’s one example: “Somebody help me!” It’s not directed to a specific person. Instead it’s given more indirectly to people in general. But it’s still a command!

So the word “should” is too weak here in verse 2. But if we just remove this word, we end up with a statement that doesn’t really work. It’s not proper English to say, “Each man have sexual relations with his

own wife.” We need some sort of a helper word to go with the word “have.” And my preference is to use the word “must.” It’s a much stronger term compared to the word “should.” It leaves no doubt that Paul was talking about something that’s required, not something that’s optional. He was saying that each man must have sexual relations with his own wife and that each woman must have sexual relations with her own husband.

So the Christian Standard Bible and all the other translations that I looked at don’t communicate the force of the commands very well in this verse. And some translations also expand on the Greek text here. The Legacy Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible give us a more literal translation. They both say, “Each man is to have his own wife, and each woman is to have her own husband.” But here’s another example where a literal translation is a bit misleading. In these two translations it sounds like Paul was commanding everyone to get married. But that can’t be what Paul meant, because later in this very chapter he recommended singleness! He was certainly in favor of marriage, but he didn’t think that it was for everyone, and he certainly didn’t command everyone to get married.

So that’s why the Christian Standard Bible, the NET Bible, and the New International Version expand on a more literal translation. They’re showing us that when Paul used the word “have,” he wasn’t talking about getting a spouse. Instead he was talking about having someone sexually. We see the same nuance in John 4, where Jesus had a conversation with a woman at a well. He told her that he had living water and that she would never get thirsty again if she drank it. But when she asked for it, he confronted her about her sin. In verse 16 he told her to get her husband, and in verse 17 she said she didn’t have one. She was technically correct, and Jesus acknowledged that fact. But look at what he said in verse 18: “For you’ve had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband.”

So Jesus said that this woman had a man, but he was not her husband. And there’s only one legitimate way to interpret that statement. She had this man in the sense that she possessed him sexually! She was apparently living with him and having sexual relations with him on a regular basis. And sadly that sort of thing happens all the time today. It’s very common for two people to live together and possess each other sexually without entering into the covenant of marriage. They haven’t made a long-term commitment to each other. They’re just committed to each other as long as they feel like it. And usually these kinds of relationships only last for a few years at best.

Now the Bible certainly commands abstinence from sexual relations for people who aren’t married. But some of the Corinthian believers were in the opposite situation. They were married, and so they had God’s permission to have sex. But they didn’t want to have sex; instead they wanted to abstain even though they were married! And so Paul made it clear here in 1 Corinthians 7:2 that married people don’t just have permission to have sex. They’re required to have sex! God commands them to have sexual relations. But of course they weren’t allowed to have sex with anyone besides their spouse. That’s why Paul said that each man must have sexual relations with his own wife and that each woman must have sexual relations with her own husband. The word “own” stresses this exclusive relationship.

But we shouldn’t think of this as just a duty to perform for our spouse. God created sex as a good gift for

us to enjoy in marriage. It's something that should be enjoyable for both spouses. It's not just for the purpose of procreation. It should also be bring great pleasure as well. Proverbs 5:18 says that a man should take pleasure in the wife of his youth. And the Song of Solomon shows that a woman should take pleasure in her husband as well. But what we're seeing in 1 Corinthians 7:2 is that having sexual relations with our spouse also helps us to remain pure. If we're enjoying our spouse sexually, then we're not going to be inclined to look for sexual pleasure anywhere else. We can help protect our spouse from the temptation to be unfaithful if we fulfill our spouse's sexual desires. Let's close in prayer and thank God for the blessing of marriage.