

# 1 CORINTHIANS 7:3–4

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Turn in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 7. Last week we took our first look at this chapter, and we saw that we're moving into the second half of this book. The first half of the book covers chapters 1–6, and in these chapters Paul was responding to reports that he received about the Corinthian church. First he addressed a report that he received about divisions in the church. So he focused on the need for church unity in the first four chapters. Then he dealt with a report that he received about a man sleeping with his stepmother. So he taught on the need for church purity in chapters 5–6.

But then in chapters 7–16 Paul started responding to a letter from the Corinthian believers. In chapter 7 and verse 1 Paul made a reference to the matters that they wrote about. And in the rest of this letter we're going to see him address a variety of topics that they asked him about in their letter. But the first topic that he focused on was the theme of marriage. That's what he talked about in the first 24 verses of chapter 7. I think he chose to address this topic first because it flows very smoothly from chapters 5 and 6. There he was talking about improper sexual behavior, and now in the beginning of chapter 7 he was focused on the proper place for sexual intimacy.

Now at the end of verse 1 Paul said that “it is good for a man not to use a woman for sex.” But the Christian Standard Bible has a footnote here that gives a more literal translation. The footnote says, “It is good for a man not to touch a woman.” And this statement is exactly what we see in the Legacy Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible, which are pretty literal Bible translations. But sometimes a literal translation is actually a bit misleading. It's obvious from the context here 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. And this interpretation is supported by most Bible translations. For example, the English Standard Version says, “It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.” And several other translations have exactly the same thing.

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 Eve and brought her to Adam. And Genesis 1:28 tells us that after God created Adam and Eve, 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 in 1 Corinthians 7:1 Paul was most likely quoting a statement made by the Corinthian believers. That's why most Bible translations like the Christian Standard Bible and the English Standard Version put quotation marks around this statement at the end of the verse.

But the Christian Standard Bible is a bit different from the English Standard Version. It says that “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 English Standard Version. But the Christian Standard Bible 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 this interpretation doesn’t really make sense. After all, Paul went on in the next few verses to correct this quotation, not to agree with it. So I think it’s more likely that the English Standard Version has the right idea 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.

Now this doesn’t mean that all the Corinthian believers held this view. In chapter 6 we saw that Paul confronted some of them about going to prostitutes. But here in chapter 7 he was addressing a different group of people in the church. He was talking to people who didn’t want to have sexual relations. So now we can 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 that’s exactly where Paul went next in this passage. In verse 2 he said, “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.” So Paul started this verse with the word “but” to show that he was correcting the faulty statement of the Corinthians in verse 1. And he started his correction by observing how common sexual immorality was. Apparently many of the professing Christians in Corinth were indulging in it. So because of this serious problem, Paul instructed spouses to have sexual relations with each other. In the original Greek text he used third person commands here to stress that he was talking about something that’s required, not something that’s optional.

Now some Bible translations like the Legacy Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible don’t say anything here about sexual relations. They just say that “each man is to have his own wife, and each woman is to have her own husband.” And these translations are more literal here, but once again we can see that a literal translation is misleading. Paul wasn’t commanding everyone to get married, because later in this in this 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. That’s why the Christian Standard Bible adds the idea of sexual relations here. Paul wasn’t talking about getting a spouse but having sexual relations with your spouse.

And we’re going to see confirmation of this view as we continue in 1 Corinthians 7. Now let’s move on to verse 3 and cover some new material. Look at what Paul wrote in this verse: “A husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise a wife to her husband.” So in this verse Paul was saying basically the same thing that he just said in verse 2. In both verses he started by talking about the husband, and then he said the same thing about the wife. The key word here is “likewise,” which shows the similarity between the responsibilities of the husband and the wife in marriage. And in the Greek text there’s another

important word that's not translated in the Christian Standard Bible, but we see it in the Legacy Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible. It's the word "also," and it shows that what Paul said about the husband also applies to the wife.

But we don't just see the language of reciprocation in both of these verses. There's also a third person command in verse 3, just like we saw in verse 2. A third person command is not as direct as the normal second person command. But it's still a command! And so once again the word "should" in the Christian Standard Bible just isn't strong enough. The word "must" is a stronger word that communicates Paul's intent more effectively. And this time there are a few translations that use this word. The Legacy Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible both have it. They show that a husband must fulfill his marital duty to his wife and that a wife must fulfill her marital duty to her husband.

Now this phrase "marital duty" comes from a Greek word that just means "obligation." It's used only three times in the New Testament. One of those times is in Matthew 18, where Jesus told a parable about forgiveness. There was a slave who had a huge debt, and his master forgave the debt. But then this slave turned around and refused to forgive a much smaller debt for someone else. And the master found out what his slave had done. Look at verse 32: "Then, after he had summoned him, his master said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me.'" The word "debt" comes from the same Greek word that we have in 1 Corinthians 7:3. It just refers to a financial obligation here.

The other place where this Greek word is used is Romans 13. In this chapter Paul was talking about the governing authorities and how we need to submit to them. In verse 6 he even said that we need to pay our taxes. Then look at what he said in verse 7: "Pay your obligations to everyone: taxes to those you owe taxes, tolls to those you owe tolls, respect to those you owe respect, and honor to those you owe honor." In this verse our Greek word is translated "obligations," and once again it refers primarily to financial obligations. We have financial obligations to our governing authorities in the form of taxes, and we need to pay those obligations. That's what Paul was talking about here.

But in 1 Corinthians 7:3 Paul obviously wasn't talking about financial obligations. Instead he was talking about marital obligations. Now I believe a husband has the responsibility to provide financially for his wife, but that's not the focus here. Instead the focus is on sexual relations. Husbands and wives must fulfill their marital duty in this area. The Greek word for fulfill normally means "to pay." It's the same word that we just saw in Romans 13:7, where Paul talked about paying our obligations. It's also used in Mark 12:17, where Jesus told people to "give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." The word "give" there refers of course to giving money. We should pay taxes to our governing authorities, but we should also give money to the Lord's work.

So Paul was using the image of paying a financial obligation in 1 Corinthians 7:3 to talk about sexual relations in marriage. Just like we have a duty to pay taxes to the government, we also have a duty if we're married to give sexual intimacy to our spouse. It's not something that we're allowed to withhold! We can't refuse to pay our taxes because we don't want to. And in the same way we can't refrain from giving sexual pleasure to our spouse because we don't want to. Whenever our spouse wants to have sexual relations, we

need to fulfill our marital duty. After all, when we get married, we're entering into a covenant with our spouse before God. And as part of that covenant we agree to fulfill certain obligations. Now this doesn't mean that the obligations of marriage don't involve any joy. Duty is not incompatible with joy. We don't have to pick only one or the other. Both of them should be part of marriage. We should enjoy the pleasures of marriage as we fulfill our marital duties.

But unfortunately many married people focus more on their own pleasure than on their duty to bring pleasure to their spouse. And this problem seems to be especially prevalent with men. Many husbands are selfish in the bedroom and care only about their own sexual pleasure. I think that's why Paul listed the husband's duty first in verse 3. A husband needs to be focused first and foremost on his own duty to his wife and not on her duty to him. He needs to do everything he can to make sure that she's enjoying sexual intimacy just as much as he is. Otherwise he's not following Paul's command for husbands to love their wives in Ephesians 5:25. After all, Paul said in 1 Corinthians 13:5 that love is not self-seeking.

So a husband's primary focus in the bedroom should be on his wife's sexual pleasure and not his own. He needs to be sensitive to her needs instead of just thinking about his own sexual desires. If his wife is really tired, then he should be patient with her and be willing to wait until tomorrow night. As Peter said in 1 Peter 3:7, husbands need to live with their wives in an understanding way. Many husbands think that they understand their wives, but they don't realize how little they know about them. And so they need to talk to their wives and ask them questions to get to know them better. A husband shouldn't be afraid to ask his wife what he can be doing to help her experience more pleasure in the bedroom. Otherwise there's a good chance that he's not fulfilling his marital duty to his wife.

Now let's move on to the next verse in 1 Corinthians 7. Look at what Paul wrote in verse 4: "A wife does not have the right over her own body, but her husband does. In the same way, a husband does not have the right over his own body, but his wife does." Notice that we have the language of reciprocation once again in this verse. Paul said something similar about both the husband and the wife. Now in verse 3 we had the word "likewise," and here we have the phrase "in the same way." But in the original Greek text Paul used the same word in both verses. The Legacy Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible also have the word "likewise" here in verse 4. In fact, they have the word "also" here as well, just like they had in verse 3. And they also link both of these statements with the word "and," just like we saw in verse 3. So in verse 4 Paul used the same terms that he used in verse 3 when he linked the two statements of each verse together.

But notice that this time Paul changed the order of the two statements. In verse 3 he talked about the husband first and then the wife. But here in verse 4 he talked about the wife first and then the husband. What he was doing here was using a beautiful literary device called a chiasm. The word "chiasm" is based on the Greek letter chi, which is shaped just like the English letter X. And this letter provides a visual illustration of what happens with a chiasm. Basically a chiasm is just repetition in reverse order. So pretend that the top of the X represents verse 3 and that the bottom of the X represents verse 4. In verse 3 the husband's duty comes first and represents the top left part of the X. Then we have the wife's duty, which represents the top right part of the X. But in verse 4 the wife comes first, and that statement represents

the bottom left part of the X. Then Paul focused on the husband, and that statement represents the bottom right part of the X. So the two lines in the X connect the matching ideas together.

Now Paul's first statement here in verse 4 isn't much of a surprise. Pretty much every society at that time would have agreed with the idea that a husband has the right over his wife's body. And it flows nicely from Paul's teaching elsewhere. Listen to what Paul said in Ephesians 5:22-23: "Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord, because the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church." So if a wife is supposed to submit to her husband, then it makes perfect sense that he would have the right over her body. The Greek word for right is used only four times in the New Testament. In Luke 22 Jesus taught his disciples that godly leadership involves service. And he contrasted it with worldly leadership in verse 25. He said that "the kings of Gentiles lord it over them, and those who have authority over them have themselves called 'Benefactors.'"

So in that verse our Greek word is translated "authority." And that's a very good translation, because this Greek word just refers to having the right of control. It's a verb that comes from the same root as the Greek noun for authority, which is used over 100 times in the New Testament. So this Greek verb is used in Luke 22, but all three of the other occurrences are found here in 1 Corinthians. We have two of them in our verse, and we've already seen the other one back in chapter 6 and verse 12. There Paul quoted the Corinthian believers, who liked to say that everything was permissible for them. But he responded by saying that not everything was beneficial and that he would not be mastered by anything. That word "mastered" comes from the same Greek word that we have twice here in 1 Corinthians 7:4.

Now in chapter 6 Paul was using this word negatively. He was basically saying that he didn't want to be mastered by anything sinful. Jesus said in John 8:34 that "everyone who commits sin is a slave of sin." But Paul said in Romans 6:17-18 that "although you used to be slaves of sin, you obeyed from the heart that pattern of teaching to which you were handed over, and having been set free from sin, you become enslaved to righteousness." So as Christians we've been set free from slavery to sin. We don't need to obey our old master anymore! But this doesn't mean that we're no longer slaves at all. Now we're slaves of righteousness and ultimately slaves of God. He's our master now, and we should obey him and do what's right in his sight.

And one of God's requirements for us is to submit to various human authorities. We already talked about how we need to submit to the governing authorities. Hebrews 13:17 tells us to submit to our church leaders. And I just read Ephesians 5:22, where Paul commanded wives to submit to their husbands. That's not a very popular verse anymore, but it still applies today! So God has delegated authority to various people in society. But he's still the ultimate authority over our lives. Whenever a human authority tells us to disobey God, then we must obey God rather than people. That's exactly what Peter said in Acts 5:29 when he was told to stop preaching about Jesus.

So when Paul said in 1 Corinthians 7:4 that a husband has authority over his wife's body, he was saying that she needs to have sexual relations with him whenever he desires. But this doesn't mean that he can do anything he wants to her body. If he treats her violently and abuses her, then she can appeal to the

governing authorities, because that kind of behavior is against the law. If he wants her to view pornography with him, or be part of a threesome, or have sex with one of his friends, then she must obey God and refuse. If her husband is not a Christian, then she should explain why she can't submit to him. And she should reiterate her desire to submit to him whenever possible. But if her husband claims to be a believer, then she can appeal to the church leaders and ask for their help to confront his sinful desire. The church is here to help believers who are struggling with sin.

So Paul said in the beginning of verse 4 that "a wife does not have the right over her own body, but her husband does." And then Paul reversed this statement at the end of the verse. He said, "In the same way, a husband does not the right over his own body, but his wife does." Now the first statement in this verse is not unexpected, but this second statement is pretty shocking! Paul said that just like a husband has authority over his wife's body, so also a wife has authority over her husband's body. There's no other place in Scripture where we're told that wives have any kind of authority over their husbands. That's because wives are supposed to submit to their husbands! But in this one area, a husband needs to submit to his wife. Whenever she wants to have sexual relations, he should gladly submit to her.

And ultimately what this means is that a husband is not allowed to give himself sexually to anyone else except his wife. If his body belongs to her, then he shouldn't give it to a prostitute or any other woman. His wife has exclusive rights to her husband's sexuality. Now this concept was completely countercultural in most ancient societies. People viewed a wife as belonging to her husband, but they didn't view a husband as belonging to his wife. Many men would have several wives, but there were hardly any examples of a woman having several husbands. And many married men would go to prostitutes, but married women generally weren't allowed to do that.

However, Paul leveled the playing field here in 1 Corinthians 7. He gave each spouse the same rights and the same restrictions. And Paul didn't come up with this idea on his own. We see it in the Old Testament as well. There are two verses in the Song of Solomon that teach reciprocation in marriage. The first one is chapter 2 and verse 16, and the second one is chapter 6 and verse 3. In both verses the woman in the song is talking about her husband. In chapter 2 and verse 16 she said, "My love is mine and I am his." Then in chapter 6 and verse 3 she said, "I am my love's and my love is mine." So in each verse the woman used the language of reciprocation. She said that she and her husband belonged to each other. And Paul was saying basically the same thing in 1 Corinthians 7:4 when he taught that a husband and a wife have authority over each other's bodies.

We see the word "body" twice in this verse, and in each case Paul was using the same Greek word that we saw eight times in chapter 6. In verse 13 Paul said that "the body is not for sexual immorality but for the Lord." In verse 18 he said that we need to flee sexual immorality because it's a sin against our own body. In verse 19 he reminded us that our body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who lives in us. Finally, in verse 20 Paul said that we need to glorify God with our body. And now in chapter 7 we're seeing what that looks like for those who are married. One of the ways that married people can glorify God is by submitting their body to their spouse. They should make themselves available for sexual intimacy whenever their spouse desires. Their bodies belong to each other and no one else!

Now we should be careful not to take verse 4 out of context. Paul wasn't saying that we can't make any health decisions for ourselves if we're married. He wasn't saying that can't decide what kind of haircut to get or what kind of clothes to wear. He was talking specifically about sexuality here. Now certainly it's wise to consult your spouse about those types of things. If your spouse likes your hair a certain way, then it's a good idea to wear it that way! I let my wife choose my glasses for me, because she's the one who has to look at them anyway! But we shouldn't be trying to micromanage decisions that our spouses make about their bodies. Paul's focus here was on sexual relations, and that's the area where a husband and wife need to submit to each other. Let's close in prayer and ask for God's help to do that.