

# 1 CORINTHIANS 7:5

October 16, 2022

Brad Norman

Turn in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 7. In chapters 1–6 we saw that Paul was responding to reports that he received about the Corinthian church. But in chapters 7–16 he was responding to a letter from the Corinthian believers. We’re going to see him address a variety of topics that they asked him about. And the first topic that he focused on was the theme of marriage in the first 24 verses of chapter 7. In verse 1 he started by quoting the Corinthian believers. Some of them thought that it was good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman. That’s what we see in the English Standard Version, which has the best translation here. So these people were advocating abstinence from sexual relations.

And in verse 2 Paul gave his response to this statement. He said that “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 made it clear that abstinence is not allowed for married people. Otherwise they will have a harder time avoiding sexual immorality. That’s why he instructed spouses to have sexual relations with each other. And in verse 3 Paul basically repeated himself for emphasis. He said that “a husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise a wife to her husband.” The phrase “marital duty” comes from a Greek word that just means “obligation.” And usually it refers to a financial obligation. For example, in Romans 13:7 Paul used it to talk about the obligation we have to pay our taxes.

So in 1 Corinthians 7:3 Paul was using the image of paying a financial obligation 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.

Then in verse 4 Paul continued to talk about our marital duties, but this time he switched to a different image. He said that “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.” So in verse 3 Paul talked about the image of paying a financial obligation, and here in verse 4 he talked the image of having rights.

And more specifically he was referring to having authority or the right of control. What he was saying here is that a husband and wife have authority over each other's body in the area of sexuality. God has ultimate authority over our lives, but he has delegated authority over our bodies to our spouses. We have the right to have sexual relations with our spouse whenever we want, as long as we're not disobeying God in the process.

Now the first statement in verse 4 is not really a surprise, but this second statement is pretty shocking! 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 this also means that a husband is not allowed to give himself sexually to anyone else except his wife. She has exclusive rights to her husband's sexuality. He wasn't allowed to have multiple wives or go to a prostitute. In most ancient cultures it was acceptable for men to do those things but not women.

So Paul leveled the playing field here in 1 Corinthians 7. He gave each spouse the same rights and the same restrictions. He said that a husband and wife have marital obligations to each other and that their bodies are under each other's authority when it comes to sexual relations. So now we can see what Paul meant when he said in chapter 6 and verse 20 that we need to glorify God with our body. 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 let's move on to 1 Corinthians 7:5. We're ready to cover some new material. Look at what Paul wrote in this verse: "Do not deprive one another—except when you agree for a time, to devote yourselves to prayer. Then come back together again; otherwise, Satan may tempt you because of your lack of self-control." Now if you thought Paul was bold in verses 2–4, then in verse 5 the gloves have come off. Here he's gotten directly in the faces of the Corinthian believers. In verses 2–3 we saw that Paul gave some commands in the third person. So he was being a bit indirect earlier. But here in verse 5 he gave a direct command in the second person. And it's not just a command but a prohibition. He was telling the Corinthians believers not to do something.

But some Bible translations are even stronger than the Christian Standard Bible here. The Legacy Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible have the phrase "stop depriving one another." Now there is no Greek word for stop here, but I think it's implied by the context. Clearly some of the Corinthian believers thought that it was a good thing to abstain from sexual relations in marriage. That's pretty obvious from the quotation in verse 1. So we should conclude that there were married people in the church who abstaining from sexual relations at that time. And Paul was essentially telling them to stop it! He did not want them to keep depriving their spouses of sexual intimacy.

The Greek word for deprive is used only six times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote four of them. Three of them are in this letter, and we already saw the first two in chapter 6. In verse 7 Paul asked the Corinthian believers, "Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated?" Then in verse 8 he said,

“Instead, you yourselves do wrong and cheat.” In those verses Paul was talking about taking another believer to civil court to resolve some kind of financial dispute. But he basically said that it was better to be cheated than to go to civil court before an unrighteous judge. And that word “cheated” comes from the same Greek word that’s in our verse. It’s a verb that just means to rob or steal.

Jesus used this word when he was interacting with the rich young ruler in Mark 10:19. This man asked what he needed to do to inherit eternal life. And Jesus responded in a surprising way. He didn’t tell him to repent and believe. Instead he listed some of the Ten Commandments. But he wasn’t teaching that we can be saved by doing good deeds. Instead he was testing the man to see if he would admit that he was a sinner. But sadly he responded by saying that he had kept all these commands. And one of the commands that Jesus listed was the eighth commandment: “Do not steal.” The Greek word for steal there is the same one that Paul used in three times in 1 Corinthians. First he used it in chapter 6 and verses 7–8. Then he used it again in chapter 7 and verse 5.

Now stealing involves taking something that belongs to someone else. And that idea certainly works well in chapter 6. But here in chapter 7 that nuance doesn’t make sense. Paul wasn’t talking about taking something but withholding something. That’s why most translations use the word “deprive” instead of the word “steal.” And we do see this nuance in one of the other places where this Greek word is used. In James 5 we see a warning directed to some ungodly rich people. James was basically telling them that God’s judgment was coming! And in verse 4 he explained one of the reasons that they were under divine judgment. He said, “Look! The pay that you withheld from the workers who mowed your fields cries out, and the outcry of the harvesters has reached the ears of the Lord of Hosts.” The Greek word for withheld in that verse is the same one that Paul used in 1 Corinthians 7:5. And I think this word has the same nuance in both verses.

So when Paul told the Corinthian believers to stop depriving one another, he was talking to them as though they owned a business and hired people to work for them. But instead of paying these workers, the Corinthians withheld their pay. They deprived their workers of the money they deserved. And that’s essentially what some of the Corinthian believers were doing to their spouses. They were depriving their spouses of something they deserved: sexual intimacy. They were basically engaging in a subtle form of stealing! They weren’t actively taking something away from their spouses. But they were passively withholding something that belonged to their spouses. And Paul wasn’t going to tolerate that. So he told them to knock it off.

But Paul did grant one exception to this rule in verse 5. And he introduced it with the word “except.” Now most Bible translations have this word, but the Greek text is more tentative. There are actually two Greek words here: the first one usually means “if,” and the second one usually means “not.” But when they’re used together, they present an option that is not recommended or expected but is simply a possibility. These two words are also used together in Luke 9, where we have the story of Jesus feeding 5,000 men. But before he did that, his disciples wanted him to send the people away to get food. Listen to their interaction in verse 13: “‘You give them something to eat,’ he told them. ‘We have no more than five loaves and two fish,’ they said, ‘unless we go and buy food for all these people.’” That word “unless” comes from the

same two Greek words that we have in 1 Corinthians 7:5. And it's pretty obvious that the disciples didn't think it was a good idea to buy food for everyone. They were just presenting it as a possible option.

And I believe that Paul was doing the same thing in our passage. He was certainly giving an exception to his rule about spouses not depriving each other, but he wasn't recommending it. And there are actually two Bible translations that convey this idea nicely. The English Standard Version and the New International Version both have the word "perhaps" right after the word "except." So Paul was just presenting this exception as a possible option. It was available to married couples, but I don't think he wanted or expected most of them to utilize it. And we can confirm this view by seeing all the conditions that he attached to this exception. There are a total of three conditions here, and the first is represented by the phrase "when you agree."

Now there's actually no Greek word for you at this point. The Legacy Standard Bible, the English Standard Version, and the New American Standard Bible are more literal here. They all have the phrase "by agreement." The Greek word for agreement is used only here in the New Testament. It's a compound word that could be translated with the phrase "same voice." So the idea here is that a husband and wife need to be on the same page about abstaining from sexual relations. They need to talk with each other about this possibility, and they need to agree about doing it. There shouldn't be any cajoling or arm-twisting. One spouse shouldn't try to pressure the other one to do it. They should have open dialogue and communication about this matter, and they shouldn't proceed unless they both choose to abstain. There must be mutual consent.

But that's just the first condition for a married couple to abstain from sexual relations. The second one is represented by the phrase "for a time." Now Paul didn't give a specific time limit here, and so there is some flexibility. But this doesn't mean that a married couple can just start abstaining for an indefinite period of time. A specific time frame needs to be selected. And in light of the first requirement, I think it's obvious that the husband and wife need to agree on how long they're going to abstain. They should set the deadline in advance and stick with it. That way they can avoid any confusion or uncertainty. And they should avoid choosing a time frame that's longer than needed.

But how do a husband and wife decide how much time is needed? That question leads to the third and final condition for a married couple to abstain from sexual relations. This is where Paul gave us the specific purpose for abstaining. The only reason that he allowed was "to devote yourselves to prayer." The Greek word for devote is used only one other time in the New Testament. It's found in Matthew 12:44, where it refers to a vacant house. So just like that house was unoccupied, a person who is unoccupied has more time to devote to prayer. It's hard to devote yourself to prayer if you're busy with all sorts of responsibilities. And one responsibility for married people is to have sexual relations with their spouse whenever their spouse wants. So being free from that responsibility will provide an opportunity to be more fully devoted to prayer.

Now prayer is a topic that appears over and over in Scripture. I found over 300 references to prayer in the Bible when I did a search. And about half of them are in the New Testament, which is a lot shorter than

the Old Testament. So this topic is even more prominent in the New Testament than the Old Testament. Now there are several Greek words that refer to prayer in the New Testament. But the one that Paul used here in 1 Corinthians 7:5 is more rare than most of them. It's used 36 times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote 14 of them. Listen to some of the key passages where he used this word. In Romans 12:12 he said, "Rejoice in hope; be patient in affliction; be persistent in prayer." So we shouldn't just pray for something once or twice. God wants us to keep asking over and over. We need to be persistent in prayer.

Now listen to what Paul said in Ephesians 6:18: "Pray at all times in the Spirit with every prayer and request, and stay alert with all perseverance and intercession for all the saints." So we shouldn't just pray at a certain time of the day. We should pray throughout the day. And we shouldn't hesitate to bring any request to the Lord. But we shouldn't just focus on ourselves and our own needs. We should also intercede for our Christian brothers and sisters. Now listen to what Paul said in Philippians 4:6: "Don't worry about anything, but in everything, through prayer and petition with thanksgiving, present your requests to God." So whenever you're tempted to worry, pray instead. Just bring your requests to God and put your trust in him. Finally, listen to what Paul said in Colossians 4:2: "Devote yourselves to prayer; stay alert in it with thanksgiving." So God wants us to be thankful as we pray. And we need to be devoted to prayer. It's something that we should be committed to doing regularly.

Now in 1 Corinthians 7:5 Paul didn't use the same Greek word for devoted that he used in Colossians 4:2. But the concept is similar in both verses. Paul was talking about a commitment to praying on a regular basis. And this is something that all Christians should be doing. We should be praising God, thanking him, confessing our sins, and presenting our requests to him constantly. But once in a while there may be a time in your life when you want to put your life on hold and pray for an extended period of time. Maybe there's a huge need in your life or a problem that you're dealing with. Or perhaps a family member or a close friend is going through a really hard time. And so you want to get away from the normal routine of life and just focus on praying. That's not a bad thing at all!

But if you're married, you're not allowed to do that unless you check with your spouse first. If you want to withdraw and pray for more than a day, you need to get your spouse's permission. That's because you won't be home in the evening when your spouse might want to be intimate. It would be wrong for you to deprive your spouse unless both of you agree about it. Now what if you really want to devote yourself to prayer, but your spouse doesn't agree to abstain that night? Well, you can still devote yourself to prayer until that time! If you have a job, take some time off work to pray, especially if you have paid vacation. And you can always ask about abstaining the next night! Most spouses aren't looking to be intimate every single night. Your spouse might even agree to abstain for two or three nights in a row!

Frankly, three days is plenty of time to be devoted continually to prayer. Most believers are like the disciples when they were in the Garden of Gethsemane with Jesus. They couldn't even stay devoted to prayer for one hour! They kept falling asleep. So I don't think most Christians will ever need to spend a really long time in prayer. And I'm talking about a full day or longer. But if you're ever in that situation, I think three days would be a reasonable length of time to abstain from sexual intimacy. In Exodus 19 when the Israelites arrived at Mount Sinai, God told them in verse 15 to abstain from sexual relations for three days

while they prepared for God to speak the Ten Commandments to them. So there's certainly precedence in the Old Testament to abstain for three days in devotion to the Lord.

But there's also precedence in the Old Testament for a husband and wife to abstain from sexual relations for a week. In Leviticus 18:19 God told men, "You are not to approach a woman during her menstrual impurity to have sexual intercourse with her." Now many Bible scholars argue that we're no longer under this command because it's not repeated in the New Testament. But the prohibition against bestiality isn't repeated in the New Testament either. So I think it's safer to conclude that all the commands about sexual activity in the Old Testament are still in effect unless we have clear teaching otherwise in the New Testament. For example, we know from 1 Corinthians 7:39 that the Old Testament law about levirate marriage is no longer in effect. A widow doesn't have to marry her brother-in-law; she can marry any Christian man she wishes. But we don't have a clear statement in the New Testament that permits a woman to have sexual relations during her period.

However, I think there's room for disagreement among Christians on this point, and so I wouldn't say that a married couple is necessarily sinning if they don't follow this Old Testament law. But my point here is that there is precedence at least during Old Testament times for a husband and wife to abstain for a week. So even though this abstinence wasn't specifically related to being devoted to the Lord, it was still a regular time when married couples would abstain. And this means that requesting a week of abstinence for an extended time of prayer would not be unreasonable. But whether you want to abstain for three days or a week or even longer, you need to get your spouse's approval. That's the point Paul was making in 1 Corinthians 7:5. The two of you need to agree on a definite time frame, and it has to be for the purpose of being devoted to prayer. Abstinence for a married couple is allowed only under those very specific circumstances.

Now the King James Version and the New King James Version include a reference to fasting here as well as prayer. But there is no mention of fasting in all the oldest copies of this letter. So it must have been added later, and unfortunately these two translations are unreliable at this point. Now certainly there's nothing wrong with fasting or taking a break from eating food. There's no command in the New Testament for us to fast, but there are certainly examples of fasting in the early church. We can find one in Acts 13:2–3 and another one in Acts 14:23. But fasting is optional and is secondary to prayer. And in 1 Corinthians 7:5 Paul wasn't talking about taking a break from food. He was talking about taking a break from sexual relations.

And in this verse Paul went on to talk about what needed to happen once that break from sexual relations was over. He said, "Then come back together again." Now in the Christian Standard Bible there's a new sentence here, but in more literal translations like the English Standard Version, the Legacy Standard Bible, and the New American Standard Bible, there's just one long sentence in this verse. So Paul was just adding another phrase to the purpose of abstinence. He started by saying that it was "to devote yourselves to prayer," and then he added a phrase that's literally translated "and be at the same place again." So Paul made it very clear that once this time of devotion to prayer is finished, a married couple needs to stop abstaining and be together sexually once again.

Then Paul ended verse 5 by talking about why it's so important for a husband and wife not to deprive each other unless they meet his very specific conditions here. He said, "Otherwise, Satan may tempt you because of your lack of self-control." The English Standard Version is more literal here; it says, "So that Satan may not tempt you." So Paul was concluding this sentence with a final statement of purpose. He didn't want us to be tempted by Satan. The Greek word for Satan is used 36 times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote 10 of them. We already saw it in back in chapter 5 and verse 5. It's pronounced *satanas*, and of course you can easily hear the similarity to our English word "Satan." Bible translators are simply transliterating the Greek word in English. In other words, they're giving us a letter-for-letter equivalent. That's the normal practice for translating names in the Bible.

Now the Greek word for Satan is always used as a name in the New Testament, and it always refers to the same individual. But the Greek word is actually a transliteration or letter-for-letter equivalent of a Hebrew word that's used 27 times in the Old Testament. And this word is sometimes used as a name, but sometimes it's not. For example, we can find this word 14 times in the book of Job, and in each case it's translated as a name in the Christian Standard Bible. But in 1 Samuel 29 it's used as a common noun and not a proper noun. At this point David was living among the Philistines because he was trying to hide from King Saul. And he was about to fight with them against the Israelites. But listen to what the Philistine commanders said about him in verse 4: "Send that man back and let him return to the place you assigned him. He must not go down with us into battle only to become our adversary during the battle."

So in that verse the Hebrew word for Satan is translated with the word "adversary." And that's exactly what the word means. It can refer to either a human adversary or an angelic adversary. And whenever it refers to an angelic adversary, it's pointing to the same individual, whom we call "Satan." He's the leader of the angels who rebelled against God, and he's our primary adversary. He's the one who tempted Jesus in the wilderness for 40 days. He's the one who entered Judas Iscariot and energized him to betray Jesus. In 2 Corinthians 11:14 Paul said that "Satan disguises himself as an angel of light." He wants to deceive us and lure us away from the truth. In 1 Timothy 5:15 Paul said that "some have already turned away to follow Satan," and that's still happening today.

So we should avoid deliberately putting ourselves in a position where we'll be tempted by Satan. The Greek word for tempt is used 38 times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote seven of them. We're going to see it again in chapter 10 and verses 9 and 13. We're pretty familiar with verse 13, where Paul said that God won't allow us to be tempted beyond what we're able to handle. God is sovereign over Satan's temptations and will always give us a way out. But this Greek word for tempt is also used in 2 Corinthians 13:5, and there it's translated with the word "test." Paul told us there to test ourselves to see if we're in the faith. So normally this word is used negatively, but sometimes it's used positively. God tests us to bring out the best in us, but Satan tempts us to bring out the worst in us. He would love for us to commit sexual immorality because of our lack of self-control.

The phrase "lack of self-control" comes from one Greek word, and it's used only one other time in the New Testament. In Matthew 23:25 it has the idea of self-indulgence. When we lack self-control, we end up indulging ourselves inappropriately. But Christians are to be marked by self-control instead. After all,

it's the last part of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:23. But Paul was being realistic here in 1 Corinthians 7:5. As Christians we're still sinners, so we don't have perfect self-control. And Paul knew that married people who are used to having regular sexual relations will have a hard time resisting temptation during a long period of abstinence. Our desire for sexual intimacy is a good gift from God, and that desire should only be fulfilled within marriage. So we should be careful not to deprive our spouses unless they agree to abstain for a limited time and for the purpose of being devoted to prayer. Let's close in prayer and ask for God's help to obey him in this area.