

1 CORINTHIANS 7:6–7

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Turn in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 7. In this chapter Paul began responding to a letter from the Corinthian believers. He was addressing 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. So these people were advocating abstinence from sexual relations. But in verse 2 Paul responded by saying that a husband and wife must have sexual relations with each other. Otherwise they will have a harder time avoiding sexual immorality. So he made it clear that abstinence is not allowed for married people.

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 our obligation to pay 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.

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 idea that a husband has authority over his wife’s body is not a surprise at all. After all, we know from several passages of Scripture that wives are supposed to submit to their husbands. But the idea that a wife has authority over her husband’s body is pretty shocking! There’s no other place in Scripture where wives are said to have any kind of authority over 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 Paul leveled the playing field here. He gave each spouse the same rights and the same restrictions.

Then in verse 5 Paul got even stronger. He commanded the Corinthian believers to stop depriving their spouses of sexual intimacy. The Greek word for deprive just means to rob or steal. Now stealing involves taking something that belongs to someone else. But that nuance doesn't make sense here. Paul wasn't talking about taking something but withholding something. And we see the same nuance for this word in James 5:4, where James accused some ungodly rich people of withholding the pay for their workers. So the Corinthian believers were like business owners who deprived their workers of payment. They were basically engaged 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 stop depriving each other.

But Paul did grant one exception to this rule in verse 5. He introduced it with the word "except," and then he gave us three conditions. First he used the phrase "when you agree." The Greek word for agree is 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.

Then Paul gave the second condition for this exception when he used 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. They need to agree on a specific time frame in advance. Then Paul covered the third condition when mentioned the specific purpose for abstaining. The only reason that he allowed was "to devote yourselves 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 and spend an extended period of time talking to God.

But abstinence for a husband and wife is allowed only under those very specific circumstances. And once that time was over, Paul said that they need to "come back together again." Then he ended verse 5 by talking about why it's so important for a husband and wife not to deprive each other apart from this exception. He said, "Otherwise, Satan may tempt you because of your lack of self-control." Satan is a fallen angel who rebelled against God and took a third of the angels with him. His name just means "adversary," and it shows us that he's our primary enemy. He wants to deceive us and lure us away from the truth, just like he did with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

So we should avoid deliberately putting ourselves in a position where we'll be tempted by Satan. He would love for us to commit sexual immorality because of our lack of self-control. Now of course Christians should be marked by self-control, but Paul was being realistic here. We're still sinners, and we won't have perfect self-control until Jesus comes back. So 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.

Now let's move on to 1 Corinthians 7:6. We're ready to cover some new material. Look at Paul wrote in verse 6: "I say this as a concession, not as a command." Now if you have a more literal Bible translation, you will see that this verse actually starts with a conjunction. The original Greek conjunction here is flexible and can be translated in different ways. The English Standard Version has the word "now," and the Legacy Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible have the word "but." And both of these words are possibilities, so we need to look at the context before we can decide which one fits better here. Let's look at the rest of the verse, and then we'll return to this issue.

Paul went on to use the phrase "I say this." And here we run into another question. What did Paul mean by the word "this"? It's a pretty ambiguous word, because it can point either forward or backward. For example, you might say to someone, "Listen to this," and then whistle a tune for them to see if they can identify it for you. In that case the word "this" is clearly pointing forward. Or you might ask someone about the weather forecast for tomorrow and then say, "I ask you this because I'm trying to figure out what to wear tomorrow." In that case the word "this" is clearly pointing backward to your question about the weather. And notice in both cases that the word "this" isn't just pointing to a single word. It's referring to a whole statement or to a set of musical notes.

So when the word "this" is used by itself, it's very flexible. We just need to look at the context to see how it's functioning. So how is the word functioning here in verse 6? Before we can answer that question, we need to look at the rest of the verse. Paul went on to say that whatever he meant by the word "this," he was saying it "as a concession, not as a command." The Greek word for concession is used only here in the New Testament, and it just refers to giving someone permission to do something. Paul wasn't talking about a concession stand where people can buy food or drinks at a stadium. He was basically talking about meeting the Corinthian believers halfway on some issue. If two people are trying to agree on something, they might make some concessions so that they can meet in the middle. That's sort of what Paul was referring to here.

Now Paul certainly could have given a command to the Corinthian believers in this situation. In fact, he gave them many commands in this letter. After all, as an apostle he was a special representative of Jesus. So he had the authority to give them an order and tell them what to do. Now usually the Greek word for command has a different nuance. It's used seven times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote all of them. In 1 Timothy 1:1 he said that he was "an apostle of Christ Jesus by the command of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus our hope." So in that verse Paul was referring to God's command for him to become an

apostle. And that's how we're going to see this word used a little later in our passage. In 1 Corinthians 7:25 Paul said, "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 trustworthy." So there Paul was talking about how Jesus didn't give a command about virgins.

But here in verse 6 Paul was clearly talking about a command from himself. And he was saying that he chose not to give a command on this occasion. And this wasn't the only time that he took this approach. We see him doing the same thing in his second letter to them. In 2 Corinthians 8:8 he said, "I am not saying this as a command." In that passage he was teaching the Corinthian believers about the importance of giving to the Lord's work. But he didn't want to command them to give. He wanted them to give willingly without being coerced. So he tried to motivate them by appealing to what some other churches were doing. He basically gave them an example instead of a command.

So in 1 Corinthians 7:6 Paul did something similar. He could have given the Corinthian believers a command using his authority as an apostle. But instead he took a different approach. He decided to make a concession to them instead. He gave them permission to do something instead of ordering them to do it or not to do it. But what was Paul talking about when he used the word "this"? Was he pointing forward to verse 7? One Bible translation takes this interpretation. It's the old Holman Christian Standard Bible, which is the predecessor of the Christian Standard Bible. In verse 6 it says, "I say the following as a concession, not a command."

Now I liked a lot of things about the old Holman Christian Standard Bible. But it's the only translation I looked at that doesn't have the word "this" here in verse 6. All the other translations are more literal and let us wrestle with the decision about whether Paul was pointing forward or backward. But the Holman Christian Standard Bible tries to force us to conclude that Paul was pointing forward. Now this interpretation is certainly a legitimate view, and it's held by some Bible scholars. But most scholars reject it because Paul didn't seem to be making a concession in the next verse. We'll take a more careful look at verse 7 shortly, but it's clear from an initial reading that Paul was just expressing his desire about the situation under discussion. It's hard to see a concession there.

So when Paul used the word "this" in verse 6, it's more likely that he was pointing backward, not forward. Now some Bible scholars believe that Paul wasn't just pointing back to verse 5. Instead they think that he was referring to verses 2-5 and his whole response to the statement from the Corinthians in verse 1. But the problem with this view is that Paul did actually give some commands in those verses! We saw a third person command in verse 2 and then another one in verse 3. In fact, we even saw a second person command in verse 5! In all three of those commands Paul was basically ordering the Corinthian believers who were married to have sexual relations with their spouse.

But then in verse 5 he made an exception to this rule. We discussed it in detail last week and reviewed it earlier today. And what we saw was that Paul didn't command the Corinthian believers who were married to abstain from sexual relations for the purpose of prayer. He just allowed for it and presented it as an option. He didn't expect most of them to do it, but he gave them permission to do it as long as both

spouses agreed on a specific time frame. And so most Bible scholars believe that Paul was pointing back to this exception when he used the word “this” in verse 6. He was making it very clear that this exception was a concession, not a command. And so I think he intended a slight contrast at the beginning of this verse. I believe the Legacy Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible are correct to put the word “but” at the beginning of the verse. Paul wasn’t contradicting what he said in verse 5. But he was offering some clarification and making sure that the Corinthian believers didn’t misunderstand him.

Now let’s move on to verse 7 and take a closer look at this verse. Look at what Paul wrote here: “I wish that all people were as I am. But each has his own gift from God, one person has this gift, another has that.” Now once again the Christian Standard Bible fails to translate a conjunction in the Greek text at the beginning of this verse. It’s actually the same exact conjunction that Paul used at the beginning of the previous verse. And once again the Legacy Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible come to the rescue. They both start this verse with the word “yet.” And this word introduces a contrast just like the word “but.” I think the translators just didn’t want to start both verses with the same word. But once again I think Paul was making a slight contrast here.

So in verse 6 Paul said that abstinence in marriage for the purpose of prayer was a concession, not a command. But now in verse 7 he took a step back and looked at the big picture. He gave his desire for every Christian about this whole situation. He said, “I wish that all people were as I am.” But what did Paul mean when he used the phrase “as I am”? It reminds me of the hymn “Just as I Am.” The idea with this hymn is that we come to Jesus for salvation just as we are. We’re not trying to hide our sins or remove them on our own. We’re admitting our sins to the Lord and turning away from them. And we’re trusting in him to cleanse us and forgive our sins.

So when Paul used the phrase “as I am,” he was referring to his current condition. But he wasn’t talking about his sinful state. He would have been the first person to admit that he was still a sinner. But the context here is focused on marriage and the need for a husband and wife to have regular sexual intimacy. And if we take a peek at the next verse, we can see more precisely what Paul was talking about. In verse 8 he wrote, “I say to the unmarried and to widows: It is good for them if they remain as I am.” Now it’s obvious that unmarried people and widows have something in common: they’re single! And Paul said that it was good for them to remain in that state. But then he used the phrase “as I am.” In other words, Paul was in that state too! He was single just like they were.

Now there’s a lot of debate about whether Paul was previously married or whether he had been single for his whole life. And we’ll talk more about that debate next week. But for now let’s just focus on the fact that Paul had a desire for every Christian to be single like he was. That’s what he was saying in verse 7. Now this obviously doesn’t mean that it’s a sin to be married. Paul wasn’t even saying that married people are inferior to single people. He was just giving a personal desire, not a moral desire. Paul used the same language in chapter 14 and verse 5 to express his wish that all the Corinthian believers spoke in tongues. But in God’s sovereignty not everyone had that spiritual gift, and the same thing was true with singleness.

In fact, Paul went on in chapter 7 and verse 7 to talk about singleness as a gift. He said, “But each has his

own gift from God, one person has this gift, another has that.” Once again we have a sentence that starts with a contrast, and this time the Christian Standard Bible actually gives us the word “but.” However, the Greek conjunction is different this time. This word is almost always used to indicate a contrast, and it often introduces a strong contrast. And I think that’s why Paul switched the conjunction here. He wanted to make a stronger contrast than what he had just been doing. So Paul wished that every Christian could be single, but he knew that his personal desire would not be fulfilled. He knew that God gave two different gifts in this area. That’s why Paul added those two phrases at the end of the verse. He said, “One person has this gift, another has that.”

The Greek word for gift is used 17 times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote 16 of them. This Greek word is pronounced almost exactly like our English word “charisma.” But these two words have quite different meanings. The English word refers to the quality of having a special charm or appeal that arouses people’s enthusiasm and loyalty. But the Greek word just refers to a gift that is freely and graciously given. The root of this word is pronounced “charis,” which is the Greek word for grace. Paul used this word over and over to refer to God’s undeserved kindness. He was so enamored with God’s grace that he invented this Greek word “charisma.” As far as we can tell, Paul was the first person in history to use this word. He wanted to stress just how gracious God is when he gives gifts to us.

Now sometimes Paul used this word to refer to the gift of salvation. The clearest example of this nuance is found in Romans 6:23. There Paul wrote, “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life.” So we deserve to be separated from God forever because of our sin, but God graciously gave us the gift of eternal life when we turned from our sins and trusted in Jesus to save us. But normally Paul used this word to refer to what we call spiritual gifts. We’re going to see it used five times in 1 Corinthians 12 with that nuance. A spiritual gift is a special, ongoing ability from God that he gives to every believer at the time of salvation so that we can serve each other and build up the church. Listen to 1 Peter 4:10: “Just as each one has received a gift, use it to serve others, as good stewards of the varied grace of God.” So in this verse we’re commanded to use our spiritual gift. That’s why we should learn about the different spiritual gifts and figure out which one we have. I’ll be offering a course in the Bible institute every three years to help with that.

But in 1 Corinthians 7:7 Paul was not talking about the gift of salvation or what we call spiritual gifts. Instead it seems pretty obvious that he was referring to singleness and marriage. Both of these statuses are gracious gifts from God that we should appreciate. We should not think of single people as second-class citizens in God’s kingdom. Paul himself was single, and he wished that all Christians could have that status. But he also recognized that marriage was a good gift from God. So we need to make sure that we have a balanced view on singleness and marriage. The church has traditionally gone to one extreme or the other, especially when it comes to church leadership. Roman Catholics say that their leaders have to remain single, while some Protestant churches won’t hire a pastor who isn’t married. But both of those approaches are wrong.

Now many single people don’t view that status as a gift from God. That’s because they have strong sexual desires and want to get married. And we’ll talk more about that situation when we get to verse 9. So many

Christians believe that Paul was not talking about singleness but the ability to be content in singleness and remain celibate for life. Now certainly there are people out there who fit this description. But I don't think Paul was thinking specifically about them. I believe he was talking more generally about the statuses of singleness and marriage. Otherwise there would always be a lot of single people out there who have the gift of being content in marriage, and some of them might never get married! It doesn't make sense to me that God would give a gift to some Christians who never get to enjoy that gift.

So here's what I would say to a single person who wants to get married. By all means go ahead and pursue marriage, because it's a wonderful gift from God for us to enjoy. But don't just get married for the sake of getting married. In other words, make sure that you don't rush into an unwise marriage. Once you're married, there's no turning back! Marriage is supposed to be for life. Your choice of a spouse is one of the most important decisions you're ever going to make. It requires a great deal of wisdom. And while you're waiting patiently to get married, make the most of your singleness. View it as a gift from God and use all the extra time that you have to serve him. That's one of the benefits of singleness, and Paul talked about it at length later in this chapter. And you might just find that as you serve the Lord faithfully, he will provide a godly spouse for you. Let's close in prayer and thank God for the gifts of singleness and marriage.