

Gifts from God: The Christian & Sex

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Because as we accept the gift of his Son, he gives us the gift of his Holy Spirit. And in so doing, God gives us himself. Because through the Son, by the Spirit, we know the Father. It's three in one. And then he says, I've signed off on your inheritance. The kingdom in its fullness is also coming as a gift to you.

As James says, every good and perfect gift is from above. God gives, and he wants us to say yes to all his good and perfect gifts.

And that includes sex within marriage. But some of the Corinthians didn't see it that way. In verse 1, Paul once again quotes one of their slogans.

[4 : 17] Now for the matters you wrote about, it is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman. Now straight away, some of you are thinking, what?

That's not what my Bible says. And that's because some of you probably have the older NIV in front of you. The NIV 1984. And it says something different.

It says, it is good for a man not to marry. And so I've debated with myself this week how much detail I need to go into about why the older and the newer NIV is different.

And I've decided to say, simply for now, just go with the newer NIV, the NIV 2011. It's also in the footnote of the older NIV. And most other major English translations like the ESV.

And I hope that as we proceed, you would see that the NIV 2011 translation simply makes much better sense in context. And if you're still feeling a little confused afterwards, well, you can always submit a question later about that.

[5 : 25] And I'll try to answer it another time. So this is what some of the Corinthian Christians were saying. It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.

And if we look at the verses immediately following verse 1, we realize that they were applying it in a certain way. Notice all the husband-wife references. And so they were really saying, it's good for a man not to have sex with his wife.

Why? To put it simply, because they had not understood that marital sex is a good gift from God. Earlier in 1 Corinthians 5 verse 9, we learned that Paul had previously written to the Corinthians, asking them not to associate with sexually immoral people.

And of course, last week, we just heard Paul tell us to flee sexual immorality. And so some of them were thinking, oh, sex must be bad. It's best to avoid it.

After all, in the Greco-Roman world that they lived in, one of the common ideas that was circulating in the culture was that you had sex with your wife only to have children.

[6 : 40] And you had sex with your mistresses or prostitutes for pleasure. And so if you shouldn't have sex with prostitutes, and you don't really need an heir, then all sex should just cease.

That's the thinking. And once again, some Christians were being influenced more by Corinth than by Christ. But God wants us to say yes to all his good and perfect gifts.

You see, what is 1 Corinthians 7 going to be all about? On the face of it, it's going to be about sex, singleness, and marriage. Even my title for this sermon series will probably give you that impression.

And for sure, it will have plenty to say about that. But let me tell you up front what 1 Corinthians 7 is really all about. In the end, it's not just about sex, singleness, and marriage.

It's about how we glorify God with the gifts he's given us. Now, this chapter is actually not easy to interpret. But if you keep that in mind, you won't go off track.

[7 : 53] 1 Corinthians 7 is about how we glorify God with the gifts he's given us. And that will also help us keep listening.

Now, in this chapter, and even in today's section, I know it can be tempting to tune out at different points. Because we might think, oh, that part is for married people, and I'm single. Or, oh, this part is for single people, and I'm married. But if it's all about glorifying God, whether we are single or married, then it's all relevant.

Now, don't forget, this letter would have been read out aloud in the presence of the entire Corinthian church. That means all of 1 Corinthians 7 would have been heard by singles and married alike. Paul wants us to hear it all, because we are all one body, one family. And because God conceives of singles helping and encouraging married people, and the merits helping single people as well and encouraging them, well, we all need to hear the full counsel of God.

[9 : 13] So let's come back now to the immediate question Paul is dealing with. Is sex good or bad? And Paul's answer is this, that's the wrong question.

You should be asking instead, what good gift has God given you? Whatever's been given, you glorify God with it. And so, if you've been given the gift of married life, enjoy it.

That's the first thing he wants to say today. If you've been given the gift of married life, enjoy it. Look at verse 2, and let me just read it from the older NIV first of all.

It should be on the screen. Now, at first glance, we might think that this means, well, since there is so much sexual temptation, get married.

That's how this verse has commonly been misinterpreted. But to have here doesn't mean get married. It means to have sexual relations.

[10 : 24] And that's why in the NIV 2011, on the screen again, verse 2 says, each man should have sexual relations with his own wife, and each woman with her own husband is translated that way to prevent misunderstanding.

And so, Paul isn't advising us to get married simply as a way to keep our sexual urges under control. Rather, with these words, Paul is helping married people to appreciate their one-flesh union more.

How so? Well, Paul says, In a world where sexual immorality is rampant, what should you do? If you're married, just do it.

That's the application. Keep doing it. Embrace your wife or husband. When you're engaging in sexual relations within marriage, you're celebrating the good gift of God, showing how God's good design is sufficient, and honoring God with your bodies.

And so, contrary to popular belief, the Bible is actually very pro-sex. Paul is very pro-sex. It's just pro-marital sex.

[11 : 44] For if this is God's gift to you, the Bible says, there is no need to turn to mistresses or prostitutes. As Proverbs 5, verse 15 and 20 put it, Drink water from your own cistern, running water from your own well.

Why, my son, be intoxicated with another man's wife? Why embrace the bosom of a wayward woman? Last week, we saw that marital sex is about more than pleasure.

It's about union and procreation. But it certainly isn't less. God is a good God. He gives good gifts. And he says, you can find pleasure in sex. So just do it. In fact, Paul goes on to cast sexual relations within marriage as a matter of obligation.

Look at verse 3. If you're married, he says, sex is simply part of what spouses owe each other.

[12 : 56] Now let's be clear. Paul doesn't have in mind here a spouse demanding sex whenever he likes. It's my right. You owe me. As we'll soon see, it's not about you.

After all throughout 1 Corinthians, Paul has been speaking about giving up your rights. And a quick glance at the context reveals that, once again, the emphasis is not on what rights we have, but what rights we have given up.

Look at verse 4. The wife does not have authority over her own body, but use it to her husband. And in the same way, the husband does not have authority over his own body, but use it to his wife. So notice here that the language isn't about demanding, but yielding. In other words, it's about giving. What is marriage after all?

It is the pledge to give oneself totally to another. And so we discover that not only does our body belong to the Lord from last week, but that if we are married, it also belongs to our spouse.

[14:16] We've given up our rights to it. And that actually helps frame the marriage relationship in a different light. If we think of our bodies as something we own, the bedroom can so easily become an arena where we negotiate contracts on how our bodily assets are to be used.

And you can bet that's not healthy for any marriage. But if we think of our bodies as a gift that has already been given to our spouse, then the bedroom becomes an outlet for generosity with each seeking the good of the other.

And that would nourish any marriage. You know, sometimes when talking about marital sex, the language of conjugal rights is used, as in family law today.

But in a Christian marriage, it's probably better to talk about conjugal giving. In a Christian marriage, it's not about you.

It's about the other person. And so a husband and a wife in a Christian marriage is never concerned about what they can get, but what they can give.

[15:41] And notice, and this is very important, that this is applied to both parties in the marriage. The husband belongs to the wife as much as the wife belongs to the husband.

In the culture of that day, to say that the wife belongs to the husband is completely unsurprising. That was the cultural assumption. But to say the reverse, now, that was completely, utterly radical. It equalized the relations between the two in a way unheard of in the entire ancient world. Indeed, if you are to look throughout the first half of 1 Corinthians 7, you will find that Paul is at pains to make clear that he sees both as equal.

In verse 2, he says, both have equal access to sexual relations. In verse 3, he says, both have equal marital duties. In verse 4, he says, both have equal authority over each other's bodies, even as they both equally give of themselves.

In verses 10 to 11, which we'll look at next week, he'll apply the same rules regarding divorce to both parties. For sex in marriage is God's gift to both husband and wife.

[17:10] And it's a gift to be given again and again by both parties to each other to be enjoyed. That's how precious it is.

In fact, it's so precious that only one activity is allowed to interrupt it. Look at verse 5. Do not deprive each other, except perhaps by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer.

Paul says that there might be a season where something so important comes up that it requires a time of extended prayer. And in such seasons, it might be wise not to have sex.

But even then, that isn't typical. In verse 6, Paul says that this is a concession, not a command. And in verse 5, notice all the conditions attached to it.

You should only stop having sex in marriage if, number one, both of you have agreed to it. And number two, it's temporary. It is never meant to become a permanent state of affairs.

[18:25] Why not? Verse 5 again. So that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. In other words, Paul says, enjoyment equals protection.

Now, if we are married, we shouldn't demand or even think of marital sex as an entitlement without which we will definitely stray. I hope that's clear already. Remember, sex is about giving, not taking, not demanding.

And so in no way can we ever excuse adultery by complaining about the lack of sex in a marriage that's not acceptable. But we should acknowledge that marital sex in itself can help you be less vulnerable to temptation.

And so that's why, verse 6, you should come together again. In other words, you might think that an exclusive focus on praying is spiritual.

But Paul says, if it's affecting your godliness, it's actually unspiritual. Instead, what's the spiritual thing to do?

[19:39] Have sex. Skip the prayer meeting to enjoy God's gift. That's the application. That's probably not what you're expecting to hear today, but sometimes that's the godly thing to do.

Because if you've been given the gift of married life, God wants you to enjoy it. Yes, really. Of course, your age, your stage of life, your circumstances, your health, and so on, all means that this will look different for each couple.

But God says, that's how I've designed it. That's how you honor me with your bodies. Saying yes to Jesus means saying yes to one another.

Now, you might be thinking, Pastor, do we really need to say all this? Well, yes. Because, first of all, the Bible says it. All I've been doing so far is simply unpacking 1 Corinthians 7, verse 1 to 6 for you. But second of all, we must teach this because we need to reclaim God's vision for sex. Survey after survey consistently shows that when it comes to sex and sexuality, the majority of Christians say that growing up, they have never ever heard anything positive said about sex in their churches.

[21 : 09] And this is in a Western setting, what more in an Asian setting. And when sex is seen only as something that is a little shameful, something that is never to be talked about openly, something that is not acknowledged as a gift from God, what happens is that this gives an opportunity for Satan to come in and twist God's truth about sex.

And if all we hear growing up is just negative messages about sex, coupled with watching unrealistic portrayals of sex, whether that's porn or just Netflix, well, if we do get married, we're setting ourselves up for trouble.

Poor views of sex is actually at the root of many issues in marriage. So parents, please, don't just teach your kids 1 Corinthians 6 verse 13 to 20, teach them 7 verse 1 to 6 as well.

Teach your kids that sex and marriage are good gifts from God. Show them how they are good gifts. It's your responsibility ultimately. Not the youth group leader, not the pastor.

We partner with you, but we don't replace you. Which actually brings me to another thing I want to say before we move on.

[22 : 35] The truth is, people can and do experience sexual difficulties in marriage. You know, if you're single today and you're listening in, you might have thought to yourself, you know, why does Paul even need to encourage people in this way?

Surely when you get married, you'll be having lots of sex. How can that even be a problem? But I want you to know that this isn't necessarily true. Babies, busyness, bitterness all could cause issues.

Despite the impression that Hollywood might have given you, marriage is not automatic heaven and sexual intimacy can be hard work. And it's probably one of the areas that people struggle the most to talk about because often they're thinking, you know, are we the only one struggling?

Why does it seem like no one else is? It's really embarrassing. And so couples suffer in silence.

Now, if that's you today, I want you to know God looks on you with compassion.

And he doesn't want you to suffer needlessly. And so can I encourage you to seek help? I check and I believe that Focus on the Family Malaysia have trained counsellors in this area.

[23 : 58] So that's one group you could approach. Go onto their website. Now, some of you are thinking, okay, pastor, that's all great what you said so far, but what if I am not married today?

What then? Am I a second-rate citizen in God's kingdom? Have I been given less than those who are married?

And so we come to the second point that Paul wants to make this morning. Secondly, if you've been given the gift of the single life, welcome it.

In verse 7, Paul makes this rather amazing statement. I wish that all of you were as I am. Now, in context, what does Paul mean?

At this stage of his life, Paul is single. Verse 8 makes it clear. And he's content with that. He's fine with his current state of singleness.

[25 : 03] And now, he even says that it's something good that he wishes others would have. You know, having just spent the last few verses talking about what a wonderful gift sex is within marriage, that it's something to be enjoyed, well, that's quite a thing to say.

So why does Paul say that? Because Paul has grasped one very important thing, that singleness is every bit a gift as marriage is.

Singleness is every bit a gift as marriage is. Whether you are married or single, both are gifts from God.

And that's why he says, verse 7 again, each of you has your own gift from God. One has this gift, another has that. One has the gift of singleness, the other has the gift of marriage, both come from God.

You see, what is this gift of singleness? Now, when I was a teenager back in the late 90s and early 2000s, it was simply assumed that the gift of singleness was a special spiritual gift, given only to a select few.

[26 : 25] Now, here's one definition from a popular author of that time, it should be on your screen. It's that special ability that God gives to some members of the body of Christ to remain single, and enjoy it, to be unmarried and not suffer undue sexual temptations.

So, it's conceived as a bit of a superpower. And so, in youth group, we would fill these questionnaires, which were meant to help you know what spiritual gifts you had. You know, these were a bit like personality tests, you know, answer these 40 MCQ questions, and at the end of it, you will be told what are the top five spiritual gifts you have.

And so, if you circled statements like, you know, compared to my peers, I don't feel a longing to be married, then you might have the gift. And every teenager was probably, quietly, and fervently praying that as they fill in those questionnaires, this special spiritual gift of singleness would not appear in their top five.

Now, full disclosure, I think it was in mine. But is this what Po means here by the gift of singleness? Because once we think about it, we begin to see how problematic that is.

Firstly, note this, this spiritual gift is discerned based on our subjective feelings. So, if you feel like you want to get married, then you probably don't have the gift.

[27 : 56] But if you feel content right now, you do, that's how the spiritual questionnaires assess whether you had the gift or not. But imagine applying that logic to someone who's been married a few years.

Right now, marriage is pretty tough. He's always fighting with his spouse, having trouble communicating, the romance is gone. And the person thinks, you know what, I really don't feel like being married anymore.

Maybe I never had the gift of marriage. And if he said that to us, we would of course tell him that he is mistaken. We would not encourage him to think this way.

Instead, we would work hard at helping him in his marriage. And so, why do we apply a different logic to singleness? Secondly, it doesn't fit with how Paul uses the word gift more generally.

In 1 Corinthians, gifts always have to do with serving others and building the church up. It's not about a sense of peace that you have because you are in a particular state.

[29 : 07] And thirdly, it devalues singleness in a way that the Bible never does. Singleness if you need a superpower to endure singleness, that suggests that singleness is in and of itself horrible.

And yet, Jesus was single all of his life and there is never even a hint that he thought of the single state in and of itself as something bad, as a state where he needed some unique empowerment from the Holy Spirit.

No, the gift of singleness doesn't here refer to some special spiritual superpower, but simply to the marital status that one happens to find himself or herself in at that particular moment.

We see over this series that this understanding also fits better with the entire chapter. So, are you currently married? That's a good gift from God.

Enjoy it. Are you currently single? That is also a good gift from God. Welcome it. You are not missing out in any way. You too get to taste the goodness of God.

[30 : 29] But at this point you might say, well, okay, that's easy for you to say, pastor, but you're married. How is singleness a good gift? Is it a good gift in the same way that that ugly t-shirt you got from your auntie is a good gift?

You know that it's given with good intentions, but if you could, you would rather return it. You don't exactly want this gift. Well, Paul will return to this question in greater detail in the second half of 1 Corinthians 7, which will be the fourth and final sermon in this series.

He'll show how singleness has certain advantages over marriage. And so I don't want to jump ahead of myself too much just yet. But I do want to at least show you now how in God's big picture, singleness is no less meaningful than marriage.

You see, just as marriage points to the gospel, so does singleness. It just does so in a different way. Let me show you how. In Matthew 22, Jesus is asked about the nature of marriage in heaven.

There's a debate between him and the Sadducees, which we won't get into. But in Matthew 22, verse 30 on the screen, Jesus makes this startling statement.

[31 : 56] At the resurrection, people will neither marry nor be given in marriage. There will be like the angels in heaven. In other words, Jesus is saying, did you know that in the new heavens and the new earth that no one will be married to each other?

That's right, we'll all be single. Human marriage has served its purpose. It was always meant as a picture of God's love for us.

But since we will experience the bottomless depth of his love in the new creation, there is no longer any need for human marriage.

And if there is no more marriage, that means there will be no more sex. For sex, too, would have served its purpose. Sex is a signpost, but since we've already arrived at the destination, we don't need the signpost anymore.

And so sex and marriage is temporary. But singleness is eternal. And so it, too, gives us a glimpse of the eternal future that awaits us.

[33 : 14] For as single people today choose to be faithful to Christ, not engage in sex outside of marriage, and find their satisfaction in him alone, what they are really doing is also acting as a signpost.

They're reminding us that all of our longings find their fulfillment in Christ, not in anything else. And that's why singleness is a gift, not just to the individual, but to the whole church.

You see, when you're at church and you see merits, you're supposed to remember Christ loves us. That's the picture you're seeing. And when you're at church and you see singles, you're supposed to remember Christ is enough.

That's the picture you're seeing. And when singles and merits want to glorify God together, and they put those two pictures together, they paint an even bigger and more beautiful picture of the gospel.

[34 : 32] Here's how my friend Sam Aubrey beautifully puts it. He says, if marriage shows us the shape of the gospel, singleness shows us its sufficiency.

If marriage shows us the shape of the gospel, singleness shows us its sufficiency. Now, that doesn't mean singleness isn't hard.

Singleness is a good gift, but it is also hard. We're not downplaying that. If you're single today, you can probably tell stories about feeling lonely, isolated, or unsupported.

you can probably speak of times where you thought it would be nice to have a spouse or a family, just someone to share life with. It's hard. Absolutely.

But I also want you to know that it's not your single state that is actually causing your frustration. It is because we all live in a fallen world, and that affects every single one of us.

[35 : 49] You see, marriage is good, but marriage is also hard. Being a parent is good, but being a parent is also hard, as any parent today.

And so singleness is good, but singleness is hard. all these things are gifts from God, but they come to us in the context of a world that is groaning and waiting to be renewed, where sin and Satan is still around.

That's why it's hard. And so what that means is whether we're single or married, we must keep supporting one another. Now, that is a theme that I think I'll return to in a later sermon, but I'll say it now.

We must support one another. And today, let me show a challenge in particular to the merits. Are you intentionally supporting the singles in your life today?

Are you helping a single person value their singleness as a gift from God? Or are you always asking them, when are you going to get married?

[37 : 10] Or do you say to them, there's bound to be someone out there waiting for you? When you make such statements, you are not helping our single brothers and sisters appreciate the gift God has given them as good.

You are not helping them find their satisfaction in Christ alone. In fact, you're implying that another person other than Christ can complete them. And you are not appreciating the value that they bring to our community as single people.

Let's do better. Well, let me wrap up by explaining the last two verses. Thirdly, if you are taking what hasn't been given you, make it right.

If you are taking what hasn't been given you, make it right. In verses eight to nine, Paul addresses one more pastoral scenario.

Now, he could be addressing one group, those who were married before but are now single again. Some suggest that the unmarried in view here are specifically widowers, which seems plausible.

[38 : 22] But we can't be sure, so I'll take it to apply more broadly as well. And at first glance, verses eight to nine seems to be saying that if you are single, you should remain unmarried unless

you can't control your sexual desires, then get married.

A number of pastors and commentators that I respect would say this too. But I don't think that they are right. You see, in verse nine, Paul is not addressing people who are struggling to control themselves.

Rather, he is addressing people who have already failed to control themselves. In other words, they are already intentionally engaging in wrongful sexual activity.

And to such people, assuming that they are Christians, Paul puts on his pastor's hat and says to them, you know, ideally it would be good if you remain single and self-controlled.

But if not, rather than keep on sinning, why not marry instead? Why such advice?

[39 : 36] Because, Paul says, ultimately, I want to see you in the kingdom of God. You see, although your NIV translates the end of verse nine as burn with passion, the Greek actually only says burn.

The NIV adds the extra two words because they assume that this burning is referring to unfulfilled sexual desire. But there is another way to take it instead.

This isn't the fire of sexual passion. It is the fire of judgment and shame. After all, did Paul not say earlier in 1 Corinthians 6 verse 9 and 10 that the sexually immoral will not inherit the kingdom of God?

Does he not suggest in 1 Corinthians 5 that the unrepentant sexually immoral man will be judged?

And so Paul says, if you are taking what hasn't been given you, the gift of sex, you are failing to control yourselves, and you are engaging in activity which is reserved only for marriage, you are setting yourself up for judgment.

So make it right by getting married. Then you can enjoy the gift of married life. Otherwise, choose instead to welcome the gift of the single life.

[41 : 05] Now, is there someone in the audience this morning who needs to obey those words? Well, in the end, both are good gifts from God.

Just don't take what isn't yours. Glorify God instead with what you've been given. Honour God appropriately with your bodies. Whether you're single, or married, enjoy it as God wants you to. For ultimately, my brothers and sisters, remember what each gift points to. Christ loves us and Christ is enough.

And that is the most amazing gift of all. Let's pray. würde Rose and geri