

SERMON NOTES
I Corinthians 7
“Sex, Singles and Marriage”

Intro:

- Exactly 35 years ago tonight was our wedding rehearsal
- *I was a nervous wreck*
- Beth and I had written our own vows and were going to say them by memory
- *Neither of us – nor the pastor marrying us – had any notes with us*
- If we forgot our lines – there was no back-up plan
- *Having been nearly paralyzed by fear of forgetting my vows – today I insist on having a written copy when performing a wedding ceremony*
- Here are the vows that I said to Beth August 17, 1974 at St. Andrew Presbyterian Church in Davenport:

Beth, being convinced that God has called us together to be man and wife, and desiring to commit myself to you, I promise to be a loving and faithful husband. Knowing God’s command that husbands ought to love their wives as Christ loved the church, and realizing my own human inadequacies, I promise to depend upon God’s Spirit for the power to love you and to trust God to make the quality of my love for you increasingly Christ-like. I will cherish you and treasure you in my heart always as God’s precious gift to me. I will honor you and live with you in an understanding way, and yet realizing that misunderstandings and disagreements will occur, I promise to seek to be reconciled to you by day’s end by admitting when wrong and forgiving when wronged. I will share with you my possessions, my life, and my very being. I promise to provide for you according to the best of my ability, and in order to fulfill that vow, I promise the following two things: I will work hard as long as I am able, and secondly, I promise to you what Paul promised to the church at Philippi: “My God is able to supply your every need according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus.” Not only will I provide for your financial needs, but I will also seek to meet your emotional and spiritual needs. I promise to take an interest in what you think, feel, and say and to seek out your opinion and respect your wishes when making decisions. Finally, Beth, I have saved this next vow for last for I believe it to be the key to fulfilling all vows previously said. I promise to you and to God before these witnesses that I will walk with my God and follow my Lord all the days of my life.

- *Now do you see why I was so nervous?*

- Like almost every other marriage relationship, we have experienced times of struggle, unhappiness, and even disillusionment
- *There have been occasions when we have needed the help of a Christian counselor or pastor or mentor*
- But we have always taken our vows seriously and have believed that our marriage was a life-long covenant relationship
- *And we have consistently invited Jesus Christ to be at the center of our marriage and family life*

- I remember well the day in the fall of 1972 when I asked Beth's father for his daughter's hand in marriage
- *He gave his blessing, but expressed some concern about my ability to provide and take care of his daughter- even after waiting nearly two years to get married until I graduated from college - we were still looking at 4 years of seminary followed by being a pastor of a small church*
- And he may have had some lingering doubts about my competence to take care of his daughter following my first visit to see Beth that previous summer

- I was working in my dad's machine shop in suburban Chicago that summer
- *I was already into overtime hours Friday morning, so I wanted to get in as many hours as possible before flying to Davenport (I didn't own a car yet)*
- My dad warned me to allow plenty of time because O'Hare is crowded Friday nights
- *I waited a little too long - and I-294 was very crowded - and there was a long line of traffic leading to the departure gates*
- Traffic stalled - and I was afraid of missing my plane - so I told my sister - *I'll get out and run while you drive, and if you start moving faster I'll get back in the car*
- **I ended up missing my plane**

- Without notifying either Beth or my parents - I told my sister to drive me to the downtown Chicago bus station and I would catch a bus to Davenport
- *Confident there would be a bus, I sent my sister home*
- But it turns out, there was no bus to Davenport that night - so I had to call home for a ride - *about 45 minutes to an hour one way from Deerfield*
- I got an earful from my dad all the way home

- *Meanwhile, Beth was waiting for me in the Moline airport (this was in the days before cell phones)*
- She waited - and waited - and waited

- *Finally, it became apparent that I was not on the plane and she went home wondering what had happened to me*
- *The next morning I drove to Davenport in my parents' car*
- *That afternoon Beth and I went to Lake McBride near Iowa City*
- *We rented a paddleboat and were ready for a swim after pedaling for awhile*
- *I playfully pushed Beth into the water and then dove in after her*
- *She didn't have time to tell me that the water was only about 3 feet deep*
- *Fortunate not to break my neck, I scraped my face and chest on the sandy, rocky bottom*
- *I was bleeding all over the place and had to be taken to the emergency room in Iowa City*
- *Though I had met Beth's parents before, that was my first visit to their home*
- *That might explain some of her father's hesitation when I asked him for his daughter's hand a few months later*
- *By the way, I was 20 and Beth was 19 when we got engaged – pretty young by today's standards*
- *Beth had no idea what she was getting into by marrying a pastor-to-be*
- *In fact, she made it quite clear that she did not feel called to be a pastor's wife – but she did feel called to be my wife*
- *A pastor's job impacts his wife and family more than most jobs impact spouse and family*
- *For one thing, though Beth has always been active in the church, she has never had a pastor since our seminary days*
- *I am the spiritual head and leader of our family, but when your husband is the pastor – he cannot also be your marriage or family counselor*
- *In most other jobs – work, family and church are separate compartments*
- *In a pastor's family – all three are entangled*
- *You can be a successful lawyer or engineer or teacher or business owner even with a troubled marriage or broken family*
- *But a supportive wife and healthy family are essential to a pastor's ministry*
- *The reason I am able to work the hours I work and still have the family life I have is because of Beth*
- *There are many challenges unique to being a pastor's wife*

- *A pastor is more dependent on his wife for being successful in his work than are most men*
- If you have any sense of appreciation for my ministry these past 15 years – please convey your gratitude to Beth

I. CELIBACY, SEX AND MARRIAGE (7:1-9)

- Many of you know that Corinth was well-known in the first-century Roman Empire as a leading center of sexual immorality and promiscuity
- *Even their religious worship normally included sexual activity with the temple prostitutes*
- What you may not know is that in Corinth there was also a small segment of the population – including some Christians – that reacted against the sexual depravity of the day by championing the cause of sexual abstinence and celibacy and even sexual abstinence in marriage
- *They taught that life-long celibacy was morally and spiritually superior to marriage*
- And some taught that abstaining from sex was a character-building virtue even in marriage
- *Was it better for a Christian to remain single and celibate than to get married?*
- Was it more spiritual for a married couple to limit their sexual activity?
- **These are the kinds of questions that Paul addresses in I Cor. 7**

1 Corinthians 7:1-7 ¹Now about the questions you asked in your letter. Yes, it is good to live a celibate life. ²But because there is so much sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife, and each woman should have her own husband.

³The husband should not deprive his wife of sexual intimacy, which is her right as a married woman, nor should the wife deprive her husband. ⁴The wife gives authority over her body to her husband, and the husband also gives authority over his body to his wife. ⁵So do not deprive each other of sexual relations. The only exception to this rule would be the agreement of both husband and wife to refrain from sexual intimacy for a limited time, so they can give themselves more completely to prayer. Afterward they should come together again so that Satan won't be able to tempt them because of their lack of self-control. ⁶This is only my suggestion. It's not meant to be an absolute rule. ⁷I wish everyone could get along without marrying, just as I do. But we are not all the same. God gives some the gift of marriage, and to others he gives the gift of singleness.

- *To live a celibate life is good – but few are called and gifted by God to do so*
- *Married life – with regular sexual relations – is the norm – as designed by God*
- *Did God give men and women a sex drive before or after the Fall?*
- *Before*
- *The sex drive is not part of man's sinful nature – the sex drive is part of God's good creation – part of God's original plan for humans created in His image to be fruitful and multiply*
- *Men strongly desire sex because God designed and built them that way*
- *Just a woman has a monthly cycle that is built into the female body – so also a man has a sexual cycle built into his body – it's a cycle of sexual desire that peaks about every three or four days in young men*
- *And this isn't just mental with men – it's physical – by God's design*
- *And it is God's plan for that God-given need to be met by regular sexual relations with his wife*
- *Since there is so much immorality – men should get married and have regular sexual relations with their wives – the biblical antidote to sexual immorality is sexual relations within marriage*
- *Of course, sex is not the only reason to get married – but it is one of the primary biblical reasons to get married*

Genesis 2:24 (NIV) ²⁴For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.

- *The husband and wife become one flesh by means of sexual intercourse*
- *Sexual relations in marriage is not God's Plan B for sinful men and women*
- *Sexual relations in marriage is God's Plan A for uniting a husband and wife in a union so intimate as to mirror physically, emotionally and spiritually the spiritual union of Christ and the Church*
- *God did not design sex as a concession to human sinfulness*
- *Quite the opposite – it is human sinfulness that interferes with and hinders the full enjoyment of God's gift of sex in marriage*
- *In most marriages, the problem is not too much sex – the problem is not enough sex*
- *Therefore, this reminder:*

1 Corinthians 7:3 - 5 (NIV) ³The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. ⁴The wife's body does not belong to her alone but also to her husband. In the same way, the husband's body does not belong to him alone but also to his wife. ⁵Do not deprive each other except by mutual consent and for a time...

- *Now, this is NOT biblical justification for a man to force his wife into sex on demand regardless of how he treats his wife or regardless of what time of the month it is*
- **Husbands are to love their wives as Christ loves the church – with a self-giving, self-sacrificing, purifying, empowering, unconditional servant love that puts his wife's needs ahead of his own**
- *Selfishly insisting on sex-on-demand is incompatible with Christ-like love*
- *And in most cases – unless there are physical health issues or past abuse issues or mental health problems or other extenuating circumstances such as times of great stress and sheer exhaustion– most women will respond sexually to a husband who is loving and attentive and a good listener and is committed to meeting his wife's emotional and spiritual needs*
- *When a husband is consistently meeting his wife's needs with words of affirmation – and emotional connection through good communication and physical affection – most women will respond*
- **When a man is feeling sexually frustrated, chances are his wife is feeling emotionally frustrated**
- *Men need to examine their own behavior before blaming all their sex life problems on their wives*
- **Having said that – there is no biblical justification for wives using sex as a weapon or manipulative tool or primarily as a reward or punishment**
- *And if wives think they can motivate their husbands to become more affectionate or more attentive or better communicators by withdrawing sex from them... well, let me ask you: **how's that working for your marriage?***
- **I don't know too many men who are positively motivated to better behavior by lack of sex**
- *It's more likely that when a husband's sex needs are not met that he will withdraw emotionally, or become angry and resentful, or become vulnerable to sexual temptation*
- **The Bible does not teach that a wife is obligated to fulfill her marital duty to her husband only when a husband scores a 7 out of 10 or higher on the communication scale that week**

- *To deprive your spouse of sex for a long period of time actually constitutes fraud according to this text: You are cheating your spouse out of what is properly his or hers according to God's design for sexual relations in marriage*
- *Once a man and a woman get married and become one flesh– your body is no longer your own – there is to be mutual submission and mutual consideration for the needs of the other*
- *The Christian who is deprived of normal sexual activity with his or her marriage partner may be tempted by Satan to sexual immorality*
- **The normal God-given sexual drive in human beings – especially in young men at their sexual peak – is very strong**
- *That is not to say that Christians can blame their sexual immorality on their spouses – and in fact, in cases of sexual addiction – even normal sexual relations in marriage will not be enough to satisfy abnormal, addictive urges*
- **But the clear teaching of this text is that regular sexual relations within marriage is one of God's holy purposes for marriage and one of God's provisions for reducing sexual temptations**
- *There is nothing spiritual about denying your God-given sex drive – nor your spouse's*

II. MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE (7:10-16)

- **Marriage is a life-time covenant relationship – not a temporary contractual agreement until problems arise or someone better comes along**
- *In verses 10-11, Paul reinforces the teaching of Jesus on marriage and divorce:*

1 Corinthians 7:10 - 11 (NIV) ¹⁰To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. ¹¹But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife.

- *In that culture it was difficult for women to divorce their husbands*
- **But Paul forbids a permanent separation as well**
- *But if she does separate – she must remain unmarried – or else be reconciled to her husband*
- **Similarly, a husband must not divorce his wife**

- Paul does not mention the exception allowed by Jesus in Matthew 19 where Jesus allows divorce and remarriage on the grounds of adultery
- *Paul is not primarily concerned in this chapter with writing a systematic treatise on divorce and remarriage*
- But the clear intent of both Jesus and Paul is that married Christians are to remain married to their spouses
- *But what if one of the spouses becomes a Christian after they are married – and the unbelieving spouse shows no interest in the Christian faith – and even becomes a hindrance to the believer’s spiritual growth – is the believer then free to divorce the unbeliever so as to be freer to pursue a growing love relationship with Jesus?*
- **NO**
- As long as the unbeliever wants to remain in the marriage – the believer must remain married regardless of the spiritual condition of the unbeliever
- *Why?*
- Not only because marriage is a life-long covenant relationship – *but also because the believer has a sanctifying spiritual influence on the unbelieving spouse – and on the children*

1 Corinthians 7:14 (NIV) ¹⁴For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.

- *Sanctified here does not mean “saved”*
- Sanctified means “set apart for God”
- *The presence of a believing husband or wife in a family is a blessing to the other spouse and the children as they come under the influence of the life of Jesus Christ being lived out in daily family relationships*
- **It is a great advantage for a child to grow up in a home with at least one believing parent**
- *A believing father and mother is ideal – and a believing father will have more influence – especially on sons – than a believing mother – but even one believing parent gives a child a greater opportunity of growing up to believe in Jesus Christ and be saved*
- However, if the unbelieving spouse wants out of the marriage now that the other spouse has become a Christian – then the believer is to let the unbeliever leave

- When the unbelieving spouse initiates the dissolution of the marriage, then the believing spouse is *“not bound”*
- Does this mean *“free to remarry”*?
- *More likely yes than no*
- It is divorce that God hates – not remarriage
- *But due to the ambiguity of the text, this must remain a matter of personal conscience whether or not to remarry in these circumstances*
- In any case, this text is not a justification for two Christians who are not getting along to get a divorce so that they try again with another partner

III. SINGLENES, SEX AND MARRIAGE (7:25-38)

- What does Paul have to say to Christian singles?
- *Evangelical Christians are taking every opportunity to communicate an “abstinence-only” message to youth*
- *Wait until marriage to have sex – with the emphasis on the word “wait”*
- American Evangelicals also tend to be quite materialistic
- *We want our children to become well-educated and well-established in their career and financially stable before getting married*
- Throughout much of Christian history, young people got married in their teens – and started to worry about becoming old maids at age 20
- *In 1970, the median age at first marriage was 21 for women and 23 for men*
- I was 22 and Beth was 21 when we got married in 1974 – about average
- *But today women are waiting until age 26 and men until age 28 on average before getting married*
- That’s a delay of 5 years – 5 years of peak sexual desire and fertility
- *Is it any wonder 80-90 % of evangelical young adults can’t wait that long to become sexually active?*
- *God created men to have strong sexual urges in their late teens and 20’s*
- *Telling them to battle those God-given urges until they’re 28 is setting them up to violate this biblical teaching:*

1 Corinthians 6:18-20 ¹⁸Run away from sexual sin! No other sin so clearly affects the body as this one does. For sexual immorality is a sin against your own body. ¹⁹Or don’t you know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who lives in you and was given to you by God? You do not belong to yourself, ²⁰for God bought you with a high price. So you must honor God with your body.

- *The problem is not with the wait until marriage message – the problem is that our Christian young adults are waiting too long to get married*
- *We advise our children to finish their education, launch their careers, become financially independent, find their identity as singles, experiment with different romantic relationships – and wait to get married until they are mature enough to handle family responsibilities – currently 28 years of age for men*
- **Essentially what we have done as a culture is extend adolescence for another 5-10 years**
- *We don't really expect young men to be mature enough to get married when they are 21 or 23*
- **But we do expect them to remain chaste until they're 28?**
- *Most men don't mind waiting until 28 to get married – but they can't – or won't – wait that long to have sex*
- *There are more Christian women looking for Christian husbands than there are Christian men looking to get married*
- *So if a 22-year-old man starts pressuring a 21-year-old woman to have sex – but he doesn't want to get married for a few years – what is that Christian woman going to do?*
- *Take a chance on losing out on a good man? Or give in to sex? Maybe even give in to living together?*
- *Not a bad deal for the men – all the pleasures of sex without any of the commitments or responsibilities of marriage and family*
- **Could it be that the solution to the problem of sexual immorality is not more lectures or sermons on abstinence?**
- ***Could it be that the solution to the problem of sexual immorality is Marriage?***

1 Corinthians 7:9 (NIV) ⁹But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion.

- *Beth and I were committed Christians when we got engaged*
- *We waited 22 long months to get married*
- *By God's grace we waited until our wedding night to have intercourse*
- *But we certainly did not have a Platonic relationship during our courtship*
- *And I'll be honest – it was getting harder and harder to wait – and I don't think I could have waited another 3-4 years to finish my education and start working full-time*
- *So we struggled financially in the early years of our marriage*

- *And being young and somewhat immature – we had our share of conflict in the early years of our marriage*
- **But we were passionately in love – and had we waited longer to get married – we almost certainly would have given in to sexual sin**
- *Which is the higher value in our American churches?*
- **Sexual purity – or financial stability?**
- Now – is Paul therefore teaching that teenagers and young adults should rush into marriage?
- *Of course not*
- On the contrary, in verses 25-38 Paul elevates celibacy and remaining single as a valid way of expressing devotion to Christ and being free to give one's best efforts and highest priority to serving Christ
- *Paul's own preference for himself and others is that singles would remain unmarried so as to give undivided devotion to the Lord rather than becoming preoccupied with the concerns of this world that come with marriage and family life*
- While it is not wrong to get married – *and those who cannot control their sexual urges should do so* – it is preferable in Paul's view to remain unmarried in light of what he calls "the present crisis" in Corinth – whatever that was
- *Paul acknowledges that married life is the norm – and is certainly better than giving in to sexual temptation – but Paul also lifts up singleness as a valid and fruitful Christian lifestyle*

IV. REMARRIAGE (7:39-40)

- *What about the formerly married and widowed? (vss. 39-40)*
- The consistent teaching of the Word of God is that marriage is a life-long union of a man and a woman
- *It is a binding covenant that can be dissolved only by death – or by the sin of adultery – though even then reconciliation is preferable*
- A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives
- *But if he dies, then she is free either to remarry or to remain single*
- But if a widow – or widower – chooses to remarry – they must marry only another believer

- *That is a given for all Christians – whether for a first marriage or for a remarriage – believers must marry only in the Lord*
- In fact, if you are single and a Christian, not only do you want to marry another believer, but you want to marry only a believer who is devoted to Christ and will help you to grow in your relationship with Christ

(Conclusion):

- How then can we sum up and practically apply the teaching of this passage?

(1) If you are single

- *Devote yourself fully to the Lord – whether God calls you to remain single for life or for a long time – or whether you are preparing to get married some day – devote yourself fully to the Lord and to growing into a spiritually mature believer who is growing in Christ-like character*
- **Commit yourself to holiness, to sexual purity, and to marrying only a believer who is growing in Christ**
- **Make choices now that support that commitment rather than working against that commitment**
- Dating non-Christians does not support a commitment to marry only a believer
- *Pursuing a romantic love relationship years before you are ready to get married does not support a commitment to holiness and sexual purity*
- If you cannot get married for a few years – then wait to get involved in a romantic love relationship – *it is unrealistic to expect yourself and your partner to remain sexually pure indefinitely while sexual desire is increasing*
- If you are already in love – and if it is at all possible to get married – even if marriage would be financially difficult – *then make plans to get married as soon as practical – with some premarital counseling of course*
- **It is better to struggle financially in the early years of marriage than to give in to sexual temptation**
- *If your boyfriend or girlfriend does not want to get married but does try to pressure you into living together – then you know he or she is not a committed Christian*
- **Say NO to living together – and if he or she leaves – so be it – better to suffer temporary heartache while pleasing the Lord than to live in sin**

(2) If you are married

- **Commit yourself to staying married for life**

- When unresolved conflicts and problems arise – stay committed to the marriage and get help in resolving your conflicts
- **Our church offers a marriage mentoring ministry that provides a trained lay couple to help you grow in your marriage relationship**
- *Husbands – love your wives as Christ loved the church*
- *Wives – respect and submit to your husbands as to the Lord*
- Husbands and wives – commit yourselves to meeting the emotional, spiritual, and sexual needs of your partner

(3) If you are married to an unbeliever

- ***Commit yourself to keeping your wedding vows – the vows apply whether your mate is a believer or unbeliever***
- *Live in peace with your unbelieving spouse as much as it depends on you*
- **Don't expect an unbeliever to live like a believer**
- ***Don't scold, lecture or judge an unbeliever for living like an unbeliever***
- **Do allow the light and love and life of Jesus Christ to be expressed through you to your spouse**
- ***Do shower your spouse with such unconditional love and respect that he or she will be drawn to Christ by your godly behavior***
- **Let your words of witness be few and wise – and let the light of your good works shine brightly**
- ***Pray for your spouse and make every effort to pass on your faith to your children***

(4) If you are formerly married and now single

- **If you are widowed, you are free to remarry or remain single – *just be sure to marry only a believer if you do remarry***
- **If you are divorced and the marriage bond was broken by adultery – you are free to remarry or remain single – *just be sure to marry only a believer and to get thorough premarital counseling if you do choose to remarry***
- **If you are separated or divorced from another Christian and no adultery was involved – then you must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to your spouse**
- ***In gray areas where biblical teaching is not perfectly clear – please seek godly counsel from mature, Bible-believing Christians before getting involved in a romantic relationship that might be contrary to God's will***

Prayer

Responsive Scripture Reading (insert)