

# Sex & Marriage

Good to be with you guys this morning. If you have your bibles, go ahead and turn with me to 1 Corinthians 7. We're about midway through this series we've called *The God of Sex*, and up on the docket for this morning is the topic of *Sex & Marriage*. So far in the series, we've talked about how according to the Scriptures, the *context* that sex belongs in is that of a husband and wife, in a lifelong marriage relationship. As out-of-vogue as that may seem in today's world, Jesus says that that is the arena where sex *flourishes*. That's where it can be everything it was meant to be.

Now, because of that, I think people often believe that sex within marriage is going to be this perfect, satisfying, amazing, *constant* thing. I know I believed that when I was single, and my guess is that many of you did too. Since marriage is where sex *belongs*, it seems like *having* sex while married should just *work*. In other words, "alright, now I'm married...let the 24/7 sex frenzy begin." I think probably a lot of us think that some version of that before we get married...annnd then we get *married*. And turns out, marriage doesn't solve all our sex problems. Just putting sex in its proper environment doesn't at all guarantee that it will be perfect. Because **sex within marriage is also affected by sin. By us expecting it to be something it can't be for us.** Turns out even sex *within* marriage is still impacted by difficulty and problems. Which is just a tad different than what many of us expect it to be. So **today, I want us to talk some about what those problems are exactly, and what can be done about them.**

But before we do that, let me just speak for a second to the single folks in the room. One of the things that I love so much about our church is that we have a lot of married people, but also a lot of singles. And I think that's really healthy. So single folks, our church is *better* because you're here. And I don't want you to think that in this teaching I'm forgetting about you. If you weren't here, last week my friend Thor gave a fantastic encouraging teaching on singleness that you should really go back and listen to. But for today's teaching on marriage, let me just say a couple things that might be helpful for you as a single person.

First, the stats still show that a majority of single people in the world will eventually get married. Depending on what study you look at, somewhere between 70-80% of people will eventually be married. So even if this teaching isn't applicable to you *now*, there's a decent chance it will be eventually. But second, even if you never marry, it's good to remember that church is a family. Which means when we hear a teaching from the bible, we don't just listen for ourselves, but also for others. Even if this teaching isn't practical for you individually, it's still worth listening. Because even if you *aren't* married, you want to be able to speak to other people in our church who *are* with wisdom. So even if you don't think the things in this sermon will ever *apply* to you, it's still worth listening well into them.

But with all that being said, we're going to take a look at 1 Corinthians 7 to help us think about sex within marriage. In 1 Corinthians, where we pick it up, Paul is doing this Q&A of sorts with the Corinthian church. They asked some questions and raised some issues, and in this part of the book, he's attempting to answer them. So let's take a look, starting in v. 1:

[1] "Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: **"It is good for a man *not* to have sexual relations with a woman."**

Now, that part in quotes, “it is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman,” is the question or issue that Paul is attempting to answer. Apparently some of the Corinthians thought “it [was] good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.” Some of you are like “who in their right mind would think *that*?” So extremely brief history lesson: what was likely happening here is that Platonian thinking had crept into the church in Corinth. Plato, the ancient philosopher, believed the physical world was *bad*. And therefore sex was bad because it was purely physical. Which would mean the enlightened person, the sophisticated person, would abstain from all forms of sex.

Okay, philosophy class is over. The point is that some of the people in the Corinthian church had started *believing* that—even married people. Even people who *were married* were regularly abstaining from sex with their spouse because they thought that was better. And here’s the thing: there are a lot of married people *today* doing the very same thing—abstaining from sex with one another. Maybe not all the time and maybe not for *philosophical* reasons, but it’s *happening* just the same. **Whether it’s just busyness, the kids, the schedule, low sex drives, or just other things in life that seem more important and more urgent than sex, it is very easy for to settle into a somewhat sexless marriage.**

Now, I know the single people in the room who *plan on* getting married are thinking “nope, not me. I’m gonna have sex like three times a day when I get married.” Yeah...marriage is going to be a very sanctifying process for you. Let’s all just take a moment and *pray* for your future spouse. Because **any couple who’ve been married for more than a year or two will tell you, it is easy for sex to become less and less of a priority as you go along.** Most of the stats<sup>1</sup> show this, and most married people know it from experience. **It’s just so easy for life to crowd out the priority of a healthy, frequent sex life. And what’s more is that it can seem like it’s not that big of a deal for that to happen.**

But what Paul is about to tell us is that it *is* a big deal. That frequent sex within a marriage matters. And he’s about to unpack for the Corinthian church *just how much* it matters. Take a look, v. 2:

*[2] But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband.*

Now, real quickly, just so we don’t hear Paul wrongly here, he’s *not* saying with this verse that *every man and every woman* should get married. That would be at odds with *lots* of other things in the bible, and with Paul’s *own life*. So he’s not saying that every human being should get married. “Having” a spouse here is probably shorthand for *already* married people, *having regular, frequent sex with* their spouse. **Not saying that every person *should* get married, but rather that every married person should have regular sex with their spouse.** That makes sense with the rest of the passage, and especially what he says next. Take a look at v. 3:

*[3] The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband.*

Now, do your best to ignore how prison-like that verse sounds in English. Some of you are like “yeah, the one way to ensure I *never* have sex with my spouse is to start calling it ‘*conjugal rights*.’” I know it sounds cold once it’s translated into English, but to find out what he means exactly let’s keep reading, v. 4:

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.lehmiller.com/blog/2014/12/4/sex-question-friday-how-often-do-married-couples-have-sex>

[4] *For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does.*

So what Paul is describing here is the *mutuality* of sex. **When you enter into a lifelong marriage relationship with another person, you're saying that your body now belongs to them, and their body now belongs to you. Marriage means seeing yourself as existing for the good of the other person *in your* marriage. That's true of every arena of life, but Paul is saying here that it's especially true *sexually*.** That you exist for the sexual enjoyment of your spouse.

Now I realize that for some of us, when we hear a statement like that, all the red lights on our dashboard start going off. That might feel to us like Paul is leaving the door wide open for husbands to *demand* sex from their wives. Or worse, for a husband to pressure his wife *into* having sex when she doesn't want to. But when you look a little closer at the passage, that's actually not what he's saying at all. **Paul is making the point, not that each spouse should *demand* the other person's body for themselves, but that each spouse should *give* their bodies to the other. It's an instruction to *give*, not to *get*.**

**Paul says this is the way sex was intended to work: both partners, serving one another sexually as an act of grace towards the other.** In other words, **both partners should be primarily concerned with *giving* sexual pleasure to the other, not with *getting* sexual pleasure for themselves.** As a pastor, here's one of the most frequent problems I've seen married couples: **it's that one or both partners are primarily looking at sex as something they *need from the other person*, and not as something they *give to the other person*.** Healthy sex requires a posture of *giving*, not *getting*. And in light of that, Paul gives his *next* set of instructions. [Therefore, he says, in v. 5...]

[5] *Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.*

So Paul says "the only valid reason I can think of that a husband and wife should regularly choose to withhold themselves sexually from one another, is to devote themselves to *prayer*." That's it. And even *then*, he says, it should be "for a *limited time*," and that both partners need to mutually agree to it.

He said in every other scenario, you should be enjoying *regular* sexual intimacy with your spouse. Because **if you *don't*—and this is important to see—he says you are literally opening your marriage up to *Satanic attack*—that's in v. 5.** Now I realize that sounds like strong language. But the bible is extremely realistic here: the temptation towards sexual sin is literally *everywhere*, in Paul's day and in ours. And Paul knows how simple it would be for a husband and a wife who aren't regularly intimate with one another, to be swept up into all that. He says "when you neglect intimacy with your spouse, you are leaving your marriage vulnerable to potentially catastrophic things. **So if giving your spouse pleasure wasn't enough motivation, do it for the strength and protection of your marriage.**"

Now, that's not to say that if you're married and you sin sexually, you get to blame it on your spouse's lack of a sex drive. Paul's not saying a lack of sex *excuses* sexual sin, but he is saying a lack of consistent sex makes a marriage *vulnerable* to sin. And so in light of that, **the default pattern of a God-glorifying marriage should be a consistent, frequent sex life.**

But that being said, I know that that raises all sorts of pastoral questions. All sorts of “but what about...?” type of pushbacks. And those questions are really important, so I want to pause and speak to as many of them as I can. Let’s talk about some potential causes for a lack of sex in a marriage, and try to speak helpfully and practically to each of them.

## 1. Lack of effort or desire

I think some version of this is the *most common reason* for lack of sex in a marriage. You have to look for it though, because it shows up in a lot of different forms. It shows up in statements like, “I’m just too tired.” “We’re just really stressed.” “I just don’t feel like it.” “I have a headache.” “The dog is watching.” “It’s too hot.” “It’s too cold.” The list goes on and on. It comes in a lot of different forms, but behind all of those, I think, is a simple lack of effort or desire.

Because as *isolated instances*, those can be fine reasons to not have sex. If you have a headache one night, no biggie. If the air conditioning isn’t working great one night and it’s too hot for sex, no worries. But if you use those types of excuses *most every time* your spouse wants to have sex? We’ve got a problem. Because that means either 1) those are *just* excuses and there’s a deeper problem going on, or 2) that sexual with your spouse is not valuable enough to try and conquer those very conquerable obstacles. It means that sexual intimacy with with the person you’ve committed your life to isn’t important enough to us to make an extra effort when effort is needed. And that’s problematic.

If Paul was speaking into that, he’d sound the alarm. He’d say “there’s something wrong if superficial things are keeping you from regular sex with your spouse.” Because **sex within marriage is about more than just satisfying each person’s sex drive**. The importance of sex goes *way beyond* just being a way for both people to stay sexually active. It’s about building *unity* within a marriage. It’s about *sustaining* unity in a marriage. It’s about togetherness, oneness. It’s about aligning your life and soul with another person. And because of that, frequent sex with your spouse matters. Probably in more ways than most of us think.

So in light of that, here’s what I’d suggest. If you’re married, and it’s really just a lack of effort and there’s nothing more going on, *figure out* ways to prioritize sex with your spouse. If you’re busy, put it on the calendar. I know that sounds like the most unromantic thing ever. I know that’s not spontaneous. But listen—**as a married couple, a nonspontaneous, frequent sex life is better than a non-existent sex life**. So if that’s what it takes, that’s what needs to happen.

Because really, this is no different than how we think about a lot of things. Think about other important things in your life: if you only went and worked out at the gym when you *felt* like it, how in shape would you be? Some of you are like “yeah that’s exactly my problem” If you only fed your kid when you *felt* like it, your kid would starve. If you only went to work when you felt like it, you would be broke and hungry. Well if we prioritize those things even when we don’t feel like it, how important is it to prioritize one of the primary things that sustains and deepens and enriches our relationship with our spouse? I would argue that if there is a list of “most important things for married people to prioritize,” sex with each other should be pretty high up on that list. *And* I’d be willing to bet that as you make it a *priority*, it will *become* more and more of a *desire*. It will become more and more natural to do, even if it doesn’t start out that way.

Practically, **if you're married and feel like sex isn't frequent, figure out how much you have sex on average now, and set an achievable goal to increase that frequency.**

Okay, the next ones go a little faster...

## 2. Secret sin

Another reason for a lack of sex in a marriage is sin that is hidden or left unresolved with your spouse. A really common one is when one partner is secretly looking at porn—we're going to talk a lot about that specifically in a couple weeks. Another one is when there is a physical or emotional affair with another person outside of the marriage. If there is intimacy happening with third party, that often means intimacy isn't going to be very frequent within marriage.

But it doesn't have to be hidden *sexual* sin. For me personally, it's often bitterness or frustration towards my wife. If I'm irritated with her about something and I'm avoiding talking to her about it, that's often going to make intimacy between us really difficult. If there's bitterness or unforgiveness left undealt with your spouse, that's going to make sex anywhere from awkward to impossible. Because remember, sex is meant to be all-of-life oneness with another person. So if there is sin present that isn't being dealt with, that's going to have an effect on sex.

**So if there is sin between you and your spouse that isn't getting addressed or resolved, let's get to work addressing it and resolving it.** Because most likely, Satan is using that to destroy more than just your sexual relationship. He's using that to construct walls between you in a whole lot of other ways. Now, for some of you, that might just be talking about something recent that happened that caused a breach of trust or intimacy. For others, it might look like rooting up months or even years of sin between you. But whatever it is, it's worth going home and starting a conversation this afternoon about it. Talking about it doesn't mean that sex is going to immediately return to normal once you do. But it's a step in the right direction.

## 3. Past sexual sin

I still remember when I was in church youth group growing up, hearing a guest speaker come in to talk about sex (because of course), and the one thing he kept saying was "the devil will getcha to have sex *before* you're married, and then not have sex *once* you're married." And as cheesy and fear-driven as that statement was, there was honestly some truth in it. One of the things that I've seen over and over again is that **sexual sin before marriage, can actually cause a lack of sex within a marriage.** A lot of times they're actually *related*.

What happens for a lot of us is that when you're sexually active *before* marriage, you start to associate sexual desire with the adrenaline rush you get from feeling like you're doing something you're not supposed to. So in your brain, being turned on gets linked to that adrenaline rush. And then you get married, and you don't get that adrenaline rush anymore, because sex isn't wrong anymore. So as time goes on, you think you just don't have a sex drive, but really all it is is that you don't get the same rush you're used to getting. **It can actually be that past sexual sin leads to a lack of sex within marriage.**

Now this one, pastorally, is a lot harder to speak to. There isn't really a quick fix for this. But here's what I'll say, just like you can train yourself to associate sex with *unhelpful* things, you can also train yourself

to associate it with *helpful* things. Studies have actually shown that the more you *have* sex with your spouse, the more you *want to have* sex with your spouse. So, at risk of *dramatically* oversimplifying things, at a neurological level, the solution to a lack of sex with your spouse really is just to *have more sex*.

And one other thing I'll mention. When Ana and I got married, we both carried with us sexual sin from our pasts. And because of all this, we knew that that stuff had the potential to affect our sexual relationship in our marriage. So when we did premarital counseling, our pastor told us that we should both pray that God would just erase the memories we had of those prior sexual experiences. He said "there's no guarantee that he will, he's not obligated to answer that prayer—but it is a very God-glorifying prayer to pray, that God would take away anything that inhibits sexual intimacy with your spouse. So it'd be worth doing at least." And I'll say for us, and me specifically, God largely answered that prayer. So I'll submit that to you as something worth doing—if it really is past sexual sin keeping you from enjoying sex with your spouse, pray that God would take that away. And he just might do it.

#### 4. Past sexual abuse

This one is obviously an extremely sensitive and complex subject. But sometimes, a lack of sex in a marriage is related to one or both people experiencing some sort of sexual trauma in their past. That sort of thing really can make sex emotionally painful or psychologically terrifying for the one who experienced the abuse.

Pastorally, there is *way* more to say on this than we have time for today. So the plan is that on the last week of this series, we are going to spend pretty much the entire time on this topic. But in brief, I will just say just briefly, if that's part of your story: **I'm sorry and you're not alone. I know it may feel like you are, but we as a church family want to walk alongside you in any way we can. Jesus desires to heal, restore and redeem and if we can be a part of that, we'd love to be.** Again, much more on what all that means in a few weeks. Just wanted to mention it this morning. On to the last one...

#### 5. Inability

**There are times and situations where sex is physically impossible or at least extremely difficult.** Things that may inhibit sex in the *short term*: things like right after your wife has a baby, or when one partner experiences some type of major surgery or injury or medical condition. Or even just seasons where you're not physically *in the same location*—when you're physically separated for a work trip or some type of travel. In those situations, the best thing to do is look for ways to emotionally and relationally connect, even when you can't do that physically. Spend quality time together. Have meaningful conversations with one another. **There are still ways to build oneness even in seasons where you can't be physically intimate with each other.**

But there are *other* situations where you are unable to have sex in the *long term*. Where there is a physical or medical issue for one partner that makes sex difficult or impossible. Here's how I'd advise approaching those situations. First, to the *other* partner: *patience is key*. Remember, sex is not something you demand from your spouse even when they can't participate in it. So do your best to assume the best of your spouse in situations where they tell you they can't participate in sex. For the partner *experiencing* the physical inability, there may be tremendous shame around sex because you *desire* it with your spouse, but *can't* participate in it. So hear me say that **where sex is less than the**

**ideal, grace abounds. You do not need to feel shame over something that is outside of your control.** So if that's you, open up with your spouse about it, and maybe in time with people in your LifeGroup about it so that they can help you battle the shame that you feel over it.

And then practically, here's what I'd encourage you to do: *make whatever efforts you can to move towards sexual intimacy with your spouse.* If it looks like therapy, try that. If that looks like some type of surgery, maybe try surgery. If that looks like getting creative with other ways to experience sexual intimacy with each other, do that. But the only thing I would warn *against* is **just resigning yourself to no sexual intimacy with your spouse.** It doesn't have to be that way. Because of Jesus, there is always hope that things can get better. But I would caution against accepting any long-term solution of no sexual intimacy with your spouse.

So I think that covers at least *most* of the causes of a lack of sex in a marriage. Hopefully, if you're married and there is a lack of sex in your marriage, that gives you some ability to diagnose and address whatever may be contributing to it.

But I'd just like to close by just explaining *why* I think sex is worth fighting for in a marriage. Because I think the easiest response to have to a teaching like this one is just "yeah, I know we should have sex more, but it's just too difficult." "It just seems like a lot of work." Maybe it's been a long time without sex with your spouse, and addressing it now just feels like this massive hill to climb—and you're not sure if you want to start down that road. So I'd like to just talk for a bit about why sex with your spouse is worth fighting for.

Let's start by remembering what we said in week 2—that sex is meant to be *purposeful*. According to Genesis 2, the purpose of sex is to become "one flesh" with your spouse. And because that is its purpose, **as you work your way through the bible, you'll find that the biblical authors circle back again and again to that idea. Almost any time they talk about the purpose of sex, they will reference that phrase "one flesh."** As one example of that, I want you to look with me on the screen at Ephesians 5, starting in v. 31. If you were here over the summer for our Ephesians series, you know that in this passage Paul is talking about the purpose of marriage. And here's what he says about it, v. 31:

*[31] "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh."*

So there's our phrase: "one flesh." So that immediately clues us in that Paul is wanting to communicate something to us about the purpose of marriage, and on some level about sex itself *within* a marriage. But then look at what he says next, v. 32:

*[32] This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.*

So it's easy for us to miss this, but on the surface, this is a very odd thing for Paul to say. He takes a passage in the bible that pretty much only ever refers to marriage and sexual intimacy, and then he says "oh by the way, this verse is talking about Christ and the Church." **So to Paul, this "one flesh" idea actually has something to do—not just with marriage, not just with sex—but it has something to do**

**with the gospel itself.** With the relationship between Christ and the Church. That sex is ultimately about *that*.

As an aside, I personally think this should verse should be helpful to both single *and* married people. It's helpful to single people because what Paul is communicating is that **as important as sex is, it is not ultimate.** So our culture will tell you in a hundred different ways that if you can't participate in sex, you can't be fully human. Sexual expression to them is a requirement to be who you really are. But Paul would hear that and say absolutely *not*. Paul would say **you can absolutely still be human despite not being sexually active, because you still get to participate in the thing that sex is ultimately pointing to anyway. Sex is a good gift from God, but it is not what life is all about.** Life is all about the relationship between human beings and God, made possible by Jesus' death on the cross. That's the point of life, so whether or not you participate in sex, you still get to participate in that. In what sex is pointing to anyway.

But here's what this says to married people—it means that sex is about *more* than just sex. It's about more than just pleasure. **Sex is actually about the relationship between Jesus and his people.** It's meant to be a reflection of Jesus giving up himself for his bride, the Church. Just like gave himself up for us, we now are called to reflect that by giving ourselves, literally our *bodies*, up for our spouse. We do that, not because of our sex drive or because it's the right thing to do, but because it's a reflection, a picture, of what Jesus did for us. This means you can give yourself up for your spouse even when you don't feel like it. This means you can fight for sexual intimacy with your spouse even when they don't reciprocate the way you want them to. And it means you can pursue sex with them even when it takes work, effort and energy.

**If you're a follower of Jesus, you can do all of that, because you follow someone who modeled that posture.** Jesus gave himself up on the cross even though he prayed in the garden, "Father, if there is any other way, let this cup pass from me." Jesus fought for a relationship with his people even though none of them responded the way he wanted them to. And Jesus pursued his people even though it took work, effort and energy, all the way down to the giving of his very life. **And if you follow Jesus, it is possible to take the same posture towards sex with your spouse.** You can pursue it, even when it's the last thing you want to pursue. So whatever our reasons, whatever our barriers, whatever our justifications are for not pursuing that with the person we're married to, we get to lay every bit of that at the cross and pursue becoming one with our spouse, as a reflection of how Jesus became one with us.

Let me just try and give you one glimpse at how this works itself out. Back when I was a communications director at a church in South Carolina, we filmed some interviews with married couples in our church for a teaching series. And in one of them we just asked them the question, *how have you seen sex with your spouse be a reminder of the gospel?* It was kind of a risky question. But we just wanted to see what people would say. And we got some great answers.

My favorite was from a couple in our church that had just gotten married recently. They both had a lot of sexual sin in their past, with others and with each other, and so they both were trying to figure out what sex *should* look like for the first time within the framework of marriage. When we asked them how sex had been a reflection of the gospel, here's what the wife said. I went back to the video and wrote it down just like she said it because I thought it was so very good:



*Sex has allowed the two of us to show compassion and show love especially in the difficult times. Like if there's a sin issue in my life, and [my husband] has brought it to my attention. Instead of me hashing it out and saying "yep, you're right—I sinned here and I keep sinning here and I don't know how to fix it." And ~~I know I can't fix it—I know the Lord has to change me—but in this~~ meantime I just feel a wreck. And I go into the cycle of self-loathing very easily. // **And there's my husband. In the midst of when I feel so unworthy, he's there. And there's this 'let me give myself to you even though you don't feel worthy. Even though you feel completely unworthy, I'm going to love you fully in that way.'** It's such a tangible picture of what Christ did for us: laying his life down for us when we sinned against him.*

Here's all I'll ask you, and then we'll be done—thanks for hanging in there today. My question is this: do you see how much more *profound* that is than just "hey let's satisfy our sex drives with each other"? Do you see how much more *beautiful* that is than "hey I'm in the mood, are you"? Do you see how much more *complete* that is than "hey we need to have sex—it's been a while"? That's what sex can be in a marriage. It can be a tangible representation of giving yourself to another. That's what it means to experience "one flesh."

So when Paul tells married couples to frequently pursue sexual intimacy with each other, it's not arbitrary. **Paul knows that when you withhold sex from your spouse you're actually withholding grace from them. Paul knows that when one partner sees sex in a one-sided way, they're actually misrepresenting who Jesus is.** He wants couples to have sex often because it is a picture of the very gospel that sustains their marriage. That's what sex was meant to be all about.

Let's pray together.