

1 Corinthians 7:1 – ‘To Touch’

ESV: Now concerning the things about which you wrote: “It is not good for a man to have sexual relations with a woman.”

NIV: Now for the matter you wrote about: “It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.”

Berean Study: Now for the matters you wrote about: It is good to abstain from sexual relations.

NASB: Now concerning the things about which you wrote, it is good for a man not to touch a woman.

KJV: Now concerning the things whereof ye wrote unto me: It is good for a man not to touch a woman.

Holman Christian Standard: Now I response to the matters you wrote about: ‘It is good for a man not to have relations with a woman.’

This passage has numerous translations, but there are three things we must first note:

1) *Initial Reflection*

a. *Paul is responding to a letter sent to him by the Corinthians.*

Any commentary, whether good or poor in quality, ought to note that Paul writes this second letter to the Corinthians based upon a meeting with Chloe’s people and a letter he has received (7.1). He has already dealt with the matters personally expressed to him by Chloe’s people (1:11) in the first 6 chapters, and now he turns to the specific matters expressed to him in *their* letter to him. One of the topics he addresses is this concept of “touching’ a woman.’

b. *Paul is quoting the Corinthian letter, which stated, ‘It is good for a man not to have relations with a woman’ (HCSB)*

As noted, this is a quotation from the letter, and Paul states it here so that they know what he is going to address. This is similar to the formula employed by Jesus, ‘*You have heard it said that...but I say to you*’. So, as we see in the third point, this is *not* Paul’s statement, and therefore it is *not* his command as an Apostle. In fact, the next two or three verses make this abundantly clear: this isn’t about single people, nor is it about anything other than sexual relations *within* marriage!

c. *Paul, therefore, is not giving that as a command, but stating the quotation he is about to deal with.*

To understand this passage, we cannot rip the verse out of context and apply the message and tenor of this sentence which Paul is about to completely disagree with, and tear apart. If we were able to do that, we could make the texts say anything we want. Note that, in Job for example, his friends preach heresy at him, and the words are in Scripture: that does not mean that these words contain *Gospel* truth, but are true in their recollection of the account.

As a result of these three points, therefore, we must ask,

2) What is the context of the passage?:

This verse introduces a section to do with marriage, and was written to combat the *heresy* that was in the Corinthian church, and summarized by the quotation 'It is good for a man not to touch a woman.' Let's walk through the context:

a. Corinth was a city of sexual depravity.

As with most pagan cultures, and especially Corinth, worshipping the gods meant temple prostitution and sex as worship and as an act of worship. It is no coincidence that Corinth was more sexually perverse than most other cities, because the Temple of Aphrodite (the Greek goddess of erotic love) was in this city. Indeed, to 'corinthianize' was a cuss word thrown at whores and man-sluts of the day. If you wanted to pick a place to contrast with Sodom and Gomorrah from the New Testament era, Corinth was your place.

b. The Christians wanted to stand apart from the sexual culture

As is proper, therefore, the Corinthian Christians wanted to separate themselves from this culture, be discernibly different *and seen to be different*. This quotation, therefore, tells us one way in which they were going to do so: they were going to avoid *all* sexual intercourse. If the pagans are having sex, we are having none! (For a modern equivalent, consider alcohol; if the world drinks, we won't! That, too, is unbiblical, but that's a whole other topic for another day.)

c. But the Christians were infiltrated by a form of Gnosticism (an early heresy).

In fact, there is more to it than simply avoiding sexual intercourse, for the Corinthians were infiltrated by a group of *ascetics* who argued that the *physical* (the body and its appetites of food, drink and sex) was inherently evil, and only the *spirit* was 'good' or 'holy'. Therefore, they tried to starve and deprive the physical, with the misconceived understanding that the less they fed these *human* desires, the more *spiritual*, and therefore holy, they would be. Thus, when Paul responds in 7:2-5 about sex *within marriage* we realize that these Christians were now saying that *married* couples were not having sex, because they wanted to be 'holier'! This is a heresy, and a hatred of the sexual appetite is a fruit of that heresy.

d. Paul's argument is that it is better to remain single, but if one desires sexual intimacy he should get married so that he can enjoy it in a holy way.

The overall point of this passage is that, in Paul's opinion, it is better *not to get married at all* (and so therefore not have sex, or be burdened by the concerns of marriage), because this frees the individual up for full-time Gospel work. Paul may have been single, or widowed, at this point, for he uses himself as an example of this model.

However, he makes abundantly clear that, if someone is burning with desire (in our terms, if someone is always horny) or is likely to sin in the areas of sexuality, they should marry *so that they can have, and enjoy, sex in the correct place and manner; one man with one woman, and not refusing the other the rights of sex that marriage brings.*

e. Therefore, sexual intimacy is part of God's plan...

What we see from this passage, therefore, is that Paul is making clear that the heresy of the Gnostics must be actively driven out: sexual intimacy within marriage is not only expected, it is good, healthy and holy! The pagans have one thing right: **sex is worship**. But in their religion sex **was** worshipped,

whereas Paul tells the Christians that they worship the Lord when they honour His plan for sex within marriage.

f. ...and so sex should be completely enjoyed inside marriage

Consider Solomon's advice in Proverbs 5,

¹⁵ *Drink water from your own cistern, (i.e., have sex with your own wife)
flowing water from your own well.*

¹⁶ *Should your springs be scattered abroad,
streams of water in the streets? (i.e. don't waste your sex-drive on other
women)*

¹⁷ *Let them be for yourself alone,
and not for strangers with you.*

¹⁸ *Let your fountain be blessed,
and rejoice in the wife of your youth,*

¹⁹ *a lovely deer, a graceful doe.*

*Let her breasts fill you at all times with delight;
be intoxicated always in her love.*

And note here, that this is the *only* place in Scripture where it is appropriate and *commanded* to be 'intoxicated' (i.e. drunk): in sexual relations with your spouse.

How are the Corinthian Christians to be different from the Corinthian pagans who worship by *touching* (i.e. having sex with) temple prostitutes? They are to have a wild, fulfilling and holy sex life, within the confines of marriage.

Indeed, this passage on sexual intimacy even has the argument that a couple (and note *couple*; this is not driven by the man or woman alone) should only abstain from sex for a short time, and only for the purposes of praying more. (i.e. 'Honey, let's not have sex tonight, let's pray instead.') Yet even this isn't necessarily an accurate application, because Augustine in the 350-360s AD commented on this verse and said that this was actually referring to the prayer meeting! Paul, Augustine said, is saying that the only time the couple shouldn't be having sex is during the prayer meeting! (This makes a *little* more sense when you remember that churches in those days met in houses and prayer meetings could last for 10 hours.) We can see in this command Paul warning against the other side of the Gnostic heresy, for some may say, well if I can worship through sex, then I'll indulge in an unhealthy, unprivate way.

So next we must ask,

3) What does verse 1 actually mean?:

The text we are considering is 1 Cor. 7:1. Let's remind ourselves what it says:

ESV: Now concerning the things about which you wrote: "It is not good for a man to have sexual relations with a woman."

KJV: Now concerning the things whereof ye wrote unto me: It is good for a man not to touch a woman.

Let John Gill expound upon this passage:

*‘Concerning ‘it is good for a man not to touch a woman’; which is to be understood, **not of merely touching a woman, which can neither be criminal, nor in all cases inexpedient, or be attended with any ill, or dangerous consequences...***

...and in this sense also is the word "touch" used, both by Greek and Latin authors. The apostle's meaning is not that it is unlawful to marry, or that it is sinful to lie with a woman in lawful wedlock...’

What is clear, here, is that the word some translations give as ‘touch’ means sexual relations, **not the literal touching** of a woman. The same linguistic attribute is given when the Old Testament uses the word ‘know’ when speaking of sexual relations: i.e., ‘and Abraham *knew* his wife and she conceived and bore and son...’. It is clear that by *knowing* Sarah in the way we understand and use the word to ‘know’ she could not have gotten pregnant, therefore we must understand the word to have a unique meaning of having sexual relations within the Hebrew culture.

Likewise, the word translated as ‘touch’ here in this passage has the same meaning. Consider Genesis 20:6, which states,

*‘Then God said to him in the dream, “Yes, I know that you have done this in the integrity of your heart, and it was I who kept you from sinning against me. Therefore I did not let you **touch** her.’ (ESV)*

For another phrase with the same meaning, consider Genesis 20:4, which uses the words ‘come near’. All of these phrases are cultural idioms used to speak of sexual relations. In our culture, we do the same thing: a man ‘makes love to’ or ‘sleeps with’ his lover. He evidently does not *conjure up* or *design* some mystical form or thing to be defined as love, and unless he is doing a particularly bad job, he isn’t sleeping either.

In no commentary that I have read, new or old, has *any* author suggested that this refers to anything other than sexual union between a man and a woman.

Finally therefore, we must consider,

4) How are we to respond?:

a. Go back to the Gospel

What is the Gospel? The Gospel *does* impose certain expectations upon us. We are indeed to abstain from sexual immorality, for example. The lists Paul gives elsewhere, even in this letter make clear that sex outside of wedlock, sex with the same gender, and sex with multiple partners is wrong. But the Gospel also frees us from the rules and regulations that bind us. Whilst there *are* Gospel commands, they are clear and explicit in Scripture. The Gospel frees us from the chains of sin so that we can be obedient. And the Gospel frees us from the chains of man-made rules that choke us. The Gospel is meant to kill legalism in our hearts, freeing us to love, not judge, and to obey because of love, not fear. We therefore must know exactly what the text says so that we can obey, and we must not impose our own ideas upon the text as rules, for that is not the Gospel, and actually undermines it, and swiftly becomes an evil, sinful, dangerous heresy, as we saw above.

Note also, that the Gospel does *not* base our salvation upon our past, present or future avoidance of sexual sin. Remember that these Corinthian Christians were almost all converted from this prostitute-using paganism. The Gospel was sufficient to forgive them from that evil idolatry.

b. Go back to the text

What does the text actually say? It may contain the sentence, 'It is good for a man not to touch a woman,' but it does not mean 'boys, don't touch females'. No, the text itself isn't even Paul's command, and he disagrees with it immediately afterwards.

The text says that Paul is going to answer that statement, and he does so by saying the exact opposite: it *is* good for a man to touch a woman! But it is more than that, because the word 'touch', we remember, means sex, so the text is *only* talking about sexual relations, it is *not* talking about friends hugging, nor is it talking about holding hands, or even cuddling at the movies. It is talking about a husband and wife engaging in the act that can lead to a child (again, remember Genesis 20:6, and the other OT phrases).

So what about 'fornication'? Well, this text does not speak of fornication so it doesn't really matter, but nevertheless, I'll answer that question. The term we understand as 'fornication' is the act of two unmarried persons having sexual intercourse, and we know from numerous other passages that this is sinful behaviour because it goes against God's design.

So does this text address what is acceptable for an unmarried couple, who are romantically involved, to do physically? Nope. The text is not about unwed people.

Some suggest that we interpret this verse to mean no touching at all between the genders, and others would also argue for a wider meaning of fornication. One cannot make either of those arguments from this text (nor any other, I would argue).

So what is not permissible? This is slightly difficult to suggest, but if we understand the Gospel to grant us liberties (such as whether to drink alcohol, the type of music we sing in church etc.), and realize that the text is very clearly not addressing unmarried couples, we cannot answer that question from this passage: we must look elsewhere. What is not permissible, I would argue is anything that is a *sexually stimulating action* leading towards sexual union. We might consider the word 'foreplay' as a suitable English word, and would include things like watching pornography, masturbation, oral sex and the act of sex itself.

As for other boundaries, however, they are Christian liberties and we must not enforce our preference as *law* when it is not. To do so is legalism, and in Galatians Paul is very clear that legalism is sinful and dangerous. As John MacArthur said in a sermon on Christian liberty,

...in Chapter 2 of Galatians and in verse 4 he talks about the fact that false brethren came into spy secretly on our liberty, which we have in Christ Jesus. That they might bring us in to bondage. The Christians in Galatia had been set free in Christ and some were trying to take them back into a legalistic kind of bondage...

c. Go back to Creation

When we think about what God created in Genesis 1 and 2, we realize that sexual intimacy was present before the Fall. Therefore we *know* that sex is good, and is a good gift given to mankind to be enjoyed, and had the benefit of being the method by which children are produced.

What the Corinthian pagans had done was to pervert the good gift, by selling it, worshipping it, exploiting it and demeaning it. Sex (again, this is sexual intercourse, not non-sexual touching) was a commodity and they had perverted it.

What the Corinthian *Christians* had done was to reject the good gift entirely! This is equally as evil as perverting it, because they were rejecting the design God had made, the gift God had given, the commands God had made and the blessing God had bestowed.

We, too, must beware throwing out the baby with the bathwater: sex is good. But only in the correct place and in the correct manner. Sex mustn't be worshipped, but we can worship God by obeying His commands to enjoy His good gifts.

d. Avoid Legalism

Finally, we must avoid legalism. The text is very clear: it is good for a husband and wife to have sex. This is what Paul says in this passage, and this is all he says. He does not speak about 'boundaries' or what is 'appropriate' for a couple who are unmarried. He does not give an age for dating, nor an age for marriage. He does not give any advice on timelines, on how we are to date or on what non-fornication, non-foreplay activities a couple are permitted to do. That is not what he intended to say, nor was it what the Corinthians were talking about.

We, therefore, must not bend the text to say what we want it to say. Paul is clear on this elsewhere; the Gospel has certain non-negotiables, but we don't get to decide what is or is not a non-negotiable. Scripture does that, and in the realm of dating, Scripture is silent, except to say that sex before marriage is sinful, and to avoid such. Our preferences may well be wise advice, but they may well not be Gospel commands, and beware to us if we try, or dare, to make them so, for then we are adding to the Gospel just as the Judaizers were in Galatians. Those men said that to believe the Gospel was to trust in Christ and be circumcised. Paul's answer? If you preach that, then while you're circumcising yourselves, cut it all off. If we say we must add to the Gospel our own preferences, we are deserving of such a rebuke.

Let's not forget that legalism caused the Fall, and it was Jewish legalists who placed Christ on the cross. Preferences are permissible, but the moment we make our preference a *law* we make the entire issue a Gospel issue, and if we add anything to the Gospel we are preaching sinful heresy.