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1 Corinthians 7:1-9

Eleventh Message

Gary Vanderet

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CULTIVATING INTIMACY IN MARRIAGE

SERIES: EXAMINING LIFE IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

I confess that if we were not committed to expository preaching, I would not have selected the text we are going to look at this morning. My wife, Kathy, and I have been praying over this text all week, and I have asked her not to wave any handkerchiefs at me while I am speaking. We will be talking about romance and sexual intimacy in marriage. I am far from being an expert on this subject, but I trust that God will speak through me. A few years ago I came across a humorous little story which many of us here probably can relate to. It tells of a husband's reaction to his wife's colds during the first seven years of their marriage:

First year: "Sugar dumpling, I'm really worried about my baby girl. You've got a bad sniffle and there's no telling about these things with all the strep going around. I'm putting you in the hospital this afternoon for a general checkup and a good rest. I know the food's lousy, but I'll be bringing your meal in from Rozzini's. I've already got it all arranged with the floor superintendent."

Second year: "Listen, darling, I don't like the sound of that cough. I've called Doc Miller to rush over here. Now you go to bed like a good girl, just for Poppa."

Third year: "Maybe you had better lie down, honey. Nothing like a little rest when you feel lousy. I'll bring you something. Have we got any canned soup?"

Fourth year: "Now look, dear, be sensible. After you've fed the kids and got the dishes done and the floor finished, you better lie down."

Fifth year: "Why don't you take a couple of aspirin?"

Sixth year: "I wish you'd just gargle or something instead of sitting around barking like a seal all evening."

Seventh year: "For Pete's sake, stop sneezing! Are you trying to give me pneumonia?"

We have come to a passage in Paul's first Corinthian letter which deals forthrightly and explicitly with the subject of sex in marriage. Though we may be a bit squeamish about mentioning this topic in church, we must remember that God is the author of sex and we ought not be ashamed to discuss what he was not ashamed to create.

There is a shift in the structure of the letter at this point. In the first six chapters, Paul responded to four problems which he became aware of through the news he had received. Now beginning in chapter 7 through chapter 15, he answers a series of specific questions that had been raised in a letter the Corinthians had sent him.

Notice the opening words in the chapter: "Now concerning the things about which you wrote." He may have had the letter open in front of him as he dictated his reply. The phrase "Now concerning" will be a familiar formula that we will see throughout the following chapters to indicate the specific topics that he addresses: marriage and divorce (7:1); singleness (7:25); food offered to idols (8:1); spiri-

tual gifts (12:1); the collection for the church at Jerusalem (16:1); and Apollos (16:12).

In these chapters Paul weaves skillfully between the twin excesses of license and legalism. Remember we talked last week about the Greek view of the body. They trivialized the body and exalted the soul as the only thing that mattered. This error led people to adopt one of two attitudes—you either disciplined your body into subjection, leading to asceticism, or you let the body indulge itself in whatever it desired. As Dave Roper has said, there were two extremes in Corinth—the monks and the drunks. In response to the rampant immorality in Corinth there was a group who had concluded that the proper response was to refrain entirely from sexual activity in life. One belief of that former group is summed up in the phrase in v. 1: "it is not good for a man to touch a woman." This is probably an excerpt from the Corinthians' letter, and thus should be in quotes. They had reacted so strongly to the sexual license in the city that they had swung over completely to the other side, forbidding what God has given us richly to enjoy.

We might wonder how anyone could think such a thought. We need also to remember that the Corinthians lived in the midst of a society where sexual expressions were closely tied with pagan worship. The temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of love, was a prominent part of Corinthian life, and the worship of Aphrodite was very popular. One came in contact with that deity by having sexual intercourse with one of the temple prostitutes. Thus, people who had grown up in that society had had a strong tie between their sexuality and pagan worship. It is not surprising then when some of these people became Christians they began to wonder whether or not something that they have been doing as a part of pagan worship could be done as a part of Christian living. Because of their past they had come to see sex as something dirty, therefore they questioned whether it was proper in a Christian marriage to have sex. This had put tremendous pressure on those who were married to dissolve their marriages, and on the engaged and widows not to marry at all. Paul deals with that pressure in this chapter.

Although our situation is not exactly the same, there are many couples today who have entered marriage with this dirty concept of sex. Perhaps you have been abused sexually. This has distorted your understanding, and because of that abuse closeness means more insecurity. I want to exhort you if that is true of you that there is hope and healing available. And although simply looking at this truth today will not bring instant change, I hope it might help bring a better perspective to your understanding of your sexuality.

Paul says that marriage is the gift and plan of God. Sex is the gift and plan of God. To reject both as evil is as much a deviation from the will of God as to indulge in sexual intercourse outside marriage.

First Corinthians 7:1-9:

Now concerning the things about which you wrote, it is good for a man not to touch a woman. But because of immoralities, let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband. Let the husband fulfill his duty to his wife, and likewise also the wife to her husband. The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; and likewise also the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. Stop depriving one another, except by agreement for a time that you may devote yourselves to prayer, and come together again lest Satan tempt you because of your lack of self-control. But this I say by way of concession, not of command. Yet I wish that all men were even as I myself am. However, each man has his own gift from God, one in this manner, and another in that. But I say to the unmarried and to widows that it is good for them if they remain even as I. But if they do not have self-control, let them marry; for it is better to marry than to burn. (1 Cor 7:1-9 NASB)

It is unfortunate that the NIV has translated the phrase in v. 1: "It is good for a man not to marry," because this clouds the rest of the chapter. According to this view, the paragraph deals with Paul's basic position on marriage in response to the Corinthians' question of whether it is advisable to get married. The phrase translated in NASB "to touch a woman" is a euphemism for sexual intercourse. This can be demonstrated linguistically and historically. In fact, the idiom occurs nine times in Greek antiquity, ranging across six centuries and a variety of writers, and in every other instance, without ambiguity, it refers to having sexual intercourse. Thus, this statement is promoting an ascetic ideal, not merely celibacy. The phrase is not Paul's view but a quote from the letter that the Corinthians had sent.

If I could paraphrase what I think the Corinthians are saying, it would go something like this, "Paul, since you are not married, you are not even seeking marriage, and since you have prohibited us from any immorality, isn't better that one never have sexual intercourse at all? After all, in the new age which we have already entered, there isn't going to be marriage anyway. And besides, since the body is unimportant, if there are those who have to fulfill their physical needs, there are always the temple prostitutes."

Thus while many Corinthian Christians were saying that it was good for husbands not to share sexual intimacy with their wives, Paul disagrees and begins verse 2 with a contrast, *but*. Here, Paul is not commanding that people marry, but that those who are married should express sexual intimacy with one another. The Greeks used the word *have* to describe sexual intimacy. It is not an option; it is a command. I have translated v. 2 this way: "Each husband must have relations with his own wife, and each wife must have relations with her own husband."

In the remaining verses, Paul shares his reasoning for sexual intimacy in marriage. He makes three fundamental statements which challenge the contemporary view prevalent in Corinth. They might also challenge your own presuppositions. As I share these truths, would you each please consider how they apply to you personally. Do not think about anyone else—let there be no conviction by proxy. As you hear these, some of you may say to yourselves, "That is just what my mate needs to hear." Allow God to speak to you. Here is Paul's first principle concerning sex in marriage:

I. Counsel to married couples: The importance of intimacy (7:1-7)

A. Sexual intimacy in marriage is a gracious gift from God—for our pleasure

God's word treats sex as a gift that accompanies marriage. Paul tells us in verse 7 that some people receive the gift of marriage and sexual union while others receive the gift of singleness and celibacy. It is clear from a passage like this where married couples are urged, even commanded, to experience sex together frequently, not just once in awhile when a child is desired, that sex was given for more than the mere purpose of carrying on the human race. In light of Roman Catholic debates on the purpose of sexual intercourse in marriage it is interesting that Paul's discussion of marriage responsibilities has no hint of any procreative function being necessarily linked to intercourse. It serves another function in marriage—that of providing pleasure to one another. Without a doubt it is the highest form of ecstasy, and rates as the number one recreation in the world. God designed it that way. He gave us those parts of our body which were designed to be stimulated and aroused. He intended them to be so. But he intended sex to be protected and experienced only within the walls which marriage provides.

Perhaps you may have been exposed to a negative view of sex in the home in which you grew up. That still lingers with you, and that may be preventing you from experiencing the joy God intends you to have. In his book, *God, Sex, and Your Child*, John Nieder shares the following letter which although extreme, helps illustrate this point. A woman writes:

From the time I was a tiny child, my mother often warned me, "Never let anyone see your body—not anyone—under any circumstances." One day, when I was six years old and my brother was eight, my parents left us on the farm while they drove to a town some distance away to get some groceries. Toward the end of the two hours, my brother began to plead with me to let him see my body and he would let me see his. After resisting for a while, I finally gave into his urging. We stood about eight feet apart, as stiff as wooden soldiers. Then we dressed quickly in case our parents drove up. When my mother noticed I was very quiet and depressed, she questioned me, and I told her the whole story. My father beat my brother with a heavy leather belt, making great welts on his legs. I could hear him screaming from behind the barn. I thought my father would never stop lashing him. I felt so bad that I lay down on my bed and cried on my pillow. My mother came in to talk to me. She was very angry. But I believe she was telling me what she believed. She said that men and women who took their clothes off and forgot to be good were the worst kind of sinners in God's sight, and that this was the unpardonable sin that God would never forgive. She said that my brother and I had come close to committing this sin and that it might be a long time before God would forgive us and love us again. She told me that if a woman were married, it is still wrong unless they wanted to have a baby.

This dear woman now realizes that her parents had a grossly distorted, unbiblical view of marital love, but she still has feelings of guilt after experiencing intimacy with her husband.

How different is God's perspective! Listen to what Mike Mason writes in his wonderful book, *The Mystery of Marriage*:

What can equal the surprise of finding out that the one thing above all others which mankind has been most enterprising and proficient in dragging through the dirt turns out to be the most innocent thing in the world? Is there any activity at all which an adult man and woman may engage in together (apart from worship) that is actually more

childlike, more clean and pure, more natural and wholesome and unequivocally right than is the act of making love? For if worship is the deepest available form of communion with God (and especially that particular act of worship known as Communion), then surely sex is the deepest communion that is possible between human beings, and as such is something absolutely essential (in more than a biological way) to our survival.

There is a second principle that Paul reveals:

B. Sexual intimacy in marriage is a gracious gift to your mate—for their fulfillment

Look at verses 3-4:

Let the husband fulfill his duty to his wife, and likewise also the wife to her husband. The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; and likewise also the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does.

We have the wonderful responsibility before the Lord, as a gift, to fulfill the sexual needs and desires of our mates. Sex is not to be a selfish, self-centered satisfying of our own desires, but a gift that we freely offer to each other. Paul is not saying to husbands and wives, “Demand your sexual rights.” Nothing could be more destructive to happiness in marriage. The focus of these verses has nothing to do with insisting upon my rights in marriage. It has everything to do with relinquishing these rights to God in order to meet the needs of our mates.

In this way, sexual intimacy in marriage teaches us a very important principle about relationships in life. We have no real ability to fulfill ourselves sexually. We need another to do that. It reminds us that life is meant to be lived in serving others. Jesus put it this way, “If you try to save your life, you will lose it.” If you go through life blindly trying to discover and meet your own needs, instead of finding fulfillment you are going to find emptiness. That is not only good advice, it is a principle of life. The way to find fulfillment in life and to have your needs met is to meet another’s needs. That is what Paul means in verse 4: “The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; and likewise also the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does.”

He is not saying here that we are slaves of one another. Nor is he referring to unhealthy marriages where perversion or sexual dominance are forced upon mates. He is declaring that the power to give fulfillment to your mate lies with you. He or she cannot fulfill themselves in this area. God made us to need someone else to fulfill us sexually.

Husband and wife belong to each other, and the question of sexual activity is a matter of sensitivity to the desires of one’s partner. In fact, in 7:4, where he speaks about rights, Paul is far from being a male chauvinist. He accords the wife the same rights to enjoy her husband’s body as he accords the husband. He doesn’t stress the importance of one partner at the expense of the other but puts them on the same level. Paul’s whole approach of equality and mutuality in the marriage relationship was completely revolutionary in his day. It remained so for many centuries, and continues to be so in every modern culture.

God has given us the ability to give the gift of love to another person, and it is the joy of that giving that creates the ecstasy of sexual love. Now to do this, to ensure your mate’s sexual fulfillment, you need to talk, to understand, to listen, to care about another’s needs. I have found in counseling that men are often clueless in this area. To him, sex may be a delightful intermission in the drama. To

her, it is inextricably woven into the whole. He is driven by physical needs accompanied by emotional needs, she is driven by emotional needs accompanied by physical needs. He may ponder “How often?” while she ponders “How?” When it comes to stimulation, a man is like microwave oven while a woman is like a crock pot! If men could remember just that, they will have come a long way towards understanding and meeting the desires of their wives.

Our bodies are for the purpose of our partners pleasure. Is your mate becoming more joyful, more free, more fulfilled in your sexual life together? Sexual intimacy in marriage is a gracious gift from you to your mate—for their fulfillment.

C. Sexual intimacy in marriage is a safeguard from satanic attack—for your protection

Look at verses 5-6:

Stop depriving one another, except by agreement for a time that you may devote yourselves to prayer, and come together again lest Satan tempt you because of your lack of self control. But this I say by way of concession, not of command.

The act of sexual intimacy is so important to a marriage that Paul will concede it should only be interrupted for important reasons—and even then only for brief periods. Even this, he adds, is a concession, not a command. Thus even such a good thing as temporary abstinence for prayer will not be raised to the level of a command, because Paul knew the difficulties that existed in the church at Corinth.

The word “deprive” has the idea of cheating or robbing. When husbands and wives refuse to share sexual expression, they are cheating their mates from fulfilling their creativity and robbing them of something owed them. Thus, planned deprivation is a form of thievery. Many reasons are given for withholding what is due our mates: tiredness, resentment, disinterest, boredom, etc. The apostle’s point here is that the devil knows our make-up, and he will take advantage of that deprivation in a marriage. In Corinth, wives were defrauding their husbands, thinking that sexual expression was not healthy in marriage, and husbands were resorting to temple prostitutes. Wherever this kind of teaching exists—that sex is dirty, that people should not marry, or that married couples should not express sexual intimacy—there will be sexual perversion, because the temptations will be too great.

It is so important to marriage that Paul says it takes precedence over everything except a brief retreat for prayer. And even then there are guidelines: It must be mutual (that word “agreement” is the word from which we get our English word, symphony.). This prevents the all too common habit of an over-spiritual partner who insists that anything but prayer and Bible reading is not pure enough for a Christ-centered marriage. It must be temporary (the word suggests a significant period in the timing of God); perhaps there is a particular need in your family, or the church, etc. Third, it is for the purpose of prayer, to spend time unhurriedly with God. But Paul says, “Be careful. Don’t continue it for very long, and by all means come together again so that Satan is not given an advantage over you.”

If there is no sexual expression within a marriage, Satan has a lot of people whom he can use to tempt us to go beyond self-control. It is interesting that the word immorality in verse 2 is plural. The sexual temptations that the devil can throw at a deprived mate come in many forms and opportunities.

This brings the apostle to a related matter. What about the sexual lives of people who once were married and no longer are? He speaks to this issue in verses 7-9.

II. Counsel to the previously married: The importance of self-control (7:8-9)

Yet I wish that all men were even as I myself am. However, each man has his own gift from God, one in this manner, and another in that. But I say to the unmarried and to widows that it is good for them if they remain even as I. But if they do not have self-control, let them marry; for it is better to marry than to burn.

We don't know precisely Paul's marriage background. It is normally assumed that he never married, but this would have been extremely unusual for a Jewish rabbi. It is possible that his wife left upon his conversion and returned to her parental home, or that he was a widower.

Paul acknowledges here that both marriage and singleness are special gifts of God. He personally shares his own preference of singleness, but will not allow that preference to be held up as norm.

To those who have been married, Paul understands that your sexual lives have been fully awakened by marriage. You are used to having your sexual drives met, and now suddenly you are deprived of your mate and you no longer have a way of satisfying those desires. Many a widow has struggled with this problem.

Paul says, if it is possible, remain single. However, we might add that in Titus, Paul instructs the younger widows to remarry, saying that would be better for them. But if you are older and you have lost your mate, his advice is remain single. If the physical struggle is severe, however, then remarry. That is the meaning of v. 9: "it is better to marry than to burn." He is not referring to judgment, but to being consumed with passion. If that is the case, then there is nothing wrong with remarrying.

As we reflect on this passage we see that we are given tremendous insight into cultivating a fulfilling sexual relationship. It begins with what we learned last week, that our bodies belong to the Lord: "we are not our own, we have been bought with a price." Therefore what God wants us to do with our bodies must be our ultimate concern. It must begin there, because if my heart is not soft toward God, then I will never be able to cultivate the discipline it takes to overcome my selfishness. The essence of love is giving—the placing of another person's needs above my own. The sooner we stop thinking of sexuality merely in terms of our own pleasure, the closer we will be to experiencing the intimacy God intended in our marriages.

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