

Lake Cities Community Church
November 13, 2010
Pastor Craig Schill
Series: 1 Corinthians

“Advice to Married Couples”
1 Cor 7:1-24

Ann Lee was out of step with her culture in two ways. First, she was something of an early feminist -- believing that women, if given the opportunity, could do nearly anything men could. But in 1736 - in Manchester, England – women’s rights were not high on the priority list. Women would not vote in an election for another 150 years. And so, she was a frustrated feminist without a formal education, working as a household servant and factory worker even though she desired and felt she was capable of so much more.

The second way she was out of step with her times was that she had no desire to marry. She was fiercely independent and had very negative views of sexual intimacy. All she wanted was to remain single. Yet her father forced her to marry in 1761 at the relatively old age of 25, to a man named James Wardley.

But when she became pregnant with her first child, she thought that perhaps she had underestimated marriage. She was deeply moved by the wonder and the miracle of the new life growing within her. It turned out, also, that she was very fertile – becoming pregnant eight times in the next nine years. But her pregnancies did not end well. Four of her babies were delivered as stillborn, and the other four - they all died in her arms within a few weeks of birth.

She sank deeper and deeper into grief and pain, and by the death of her last child in 1770 she suffered a complete mental breakdown and was placed into an insane asylum. In

1774, after being released she and her husband immigrated to America desperately seeking a fresh start in life and perhaps a culture more suited to Ann's beliefs.

Now let me ask you a hypothetical question. Really out of the blue. If Ann Lee, upon arriving in America decided to start her own religion, and make up her own rules, how do you think that her tragic situation might shape her theology? How would she view the sovereignty of God? The goodness of God? The role of women? The institution of marriage or the so-called blessing of sexuality?

The truth is that all of us, to a certain degree, allow our faith and beliefs to be shaped by our tragedies or triumphs in life, rather than by God's word. How many times have you heard people say in their sorrow: "God has forgotten me. God must not love me." Is that true? Or has their theology been shaped by their experiences? On the other hand, a person experiencing God's blessing might say: "God never wants us to suffer. He only wants us to be happy." Is that true?

Turn with me to 1 Corinthians chapter seven, verses 1-24. In our passage this morning we are going to see that the Corinthian's theology of marriage, was greatly influenced, not by God's Word, but by their own experiences and culture; just as these important topics continue to be today.

Our passage has three movements. The first section, 1-9, speaks to the issue of sex within marriage. We will examine the problem of their distorted theology, then what was going on in the culture to cause that. Next, we will see Paul's response and finally our application. Next, in verses 10-16, the topic of divorce is introduced. We will again examine

the theological problem, the influencing factors, Paul's response and our application. Finally we will look at verses 18-24 where Paul concludes with a general admonition.

Sexuality in marriage, 1-9

Problem:

The problem regarding the Corinthian's views of sexuality comes to us – right away - in verse one: **1Cor. 7:1 Now concerning the things about which you wrote, it is good for a man not to touch a woman.** You may recall that last week Paul finished addressing the issues that came to him from Chloe's household (chapters 1-6: division, immorality and lawsuits). Now Paul is responding to a letter the Corinthians wrote to him that contained a variety of issues. The first issue is the statement: **"It is good for a man not to touch a woman."** This is what they were teaching in the church. Would Paul agree with them? The phrase "touch a woman" is a euphemism for sex. And the problem was that they were teaching married couples not to have sex at all! "Marital celibacy," was in vogue in the church, part of their premarital counseling program and endorsed by church leadership. And they are asking, "Paul – what do you think about our theology of sexuality?"

Cultural Background

And you and I might wonder, "Why in the world would the church teach such a thing?" It seems so odd to us. But we must consider what shaped this distorted theology? It was not the Word of God but the practices and culture around them.

You will recall that Corinth was the sex capital of the Roman Empire. In a sexually charged Greek culture, the City of Corinth led the way. I truly think we have difficulty even

putting to words how permissive and promiscuous this culture was. The very name “Corinthian” came to be used as a synonym for prostitution and immorality. And out of this environment people were coming to Christ - responding to the gospel and they began wondering how, if at all, their new faith should influence their sexuality.

One group, which we saw in chapter five, said – “Sexual immorality and Christianity are compatible! There is no problem here!” But Paul said to them “No - the Bible teaches that you are one with Christ. Don’t unite Christ with a prostitute! Flee immorality!” He corrected their theology based on Scripture. **A second group** - the group here - went in the opposite direction saying, “The sexual problems in our culture are so bad we need to not only ‘flee immorality,’ we need to flee sex entirely.”

Another influencing factor was a new philosophy that exalted the spiritual and diminished the physical, and taught that the really spiritual people avoided sex altogether. This grew into a heresy called Gnosticism, which became the theological basis for celibacy of priests and the prohibition of clergy marriage in the Roman Catholic Church, which (I believe) is a continuation of the Corinthians theological error! Listen to the genesis of this from the church council the Council of Elvira in 306 A.D. There they declared: “Bishops, presbyters, deacons, and others with a position in the ministry are to abstain completely from sexual intercourse with their wives and from the procreation of children. If anyone disobeys, he shall be removed from the clerical office.”

Hey we are getting ready to start a Deacon Board, anyone interested?

It is bad theology!

Paul's Response

What is Paul's response? Verse two: **But because of immoralities** (which are all around you), **each man is to have his own wife, and each woman is to have her own husband** (that is, sexual relations in marriage is good and is God's plan!). **1Cor. 7:3 The husband must fulfill his (sexual) duty to his wife, and likewise also the wife** (must fulfill her sexual duty) **to her husband. 1Cor. 7:4** (Here is the theology) **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*.** This is Biblical teaching - that immorality should not cause the abandonment of sex within marriage, but should encourage a regular, healthy sexual relationships as a guard *against* immorality! The background of this passage is Genesis two and Jesus teaching that the two become ONE, and if you are one you have mutual ownership over one another's body.

Application

So what is Paul's and our application? **1Cor. 7:5 Stop depriving one another,** (stop teaching marital celibacy) **except by agreement for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer, and come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.** Regular sexual intimacy in marriage is God perfect plan and is a protection from temptation. So, regarding application... I do not feel more need to be said here... you married people can figure that out for yourselves.

Issue of Divorce

Now we are going to skip over verses 6-9 in which Paul talks to single people, for whom abstinence *is* the right answer! Next week we will look more in depth at Paul's advice to singles, but now we want to move to Paul's second major issue – that of divorce.

The issue of Divorce 10-16

Introduction of Problem

The problem is introduced in verse 10-11. [1Cor. 7:10](#) But to the married I give instructions, not I, but the Lord, that the wife should not leave her husband [1Cor. 7:11](#) (but if she does leave, she must remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband should not divorce his wife. The problem, which is implied here, is that Christians were for various reasons divorcing one another rather than working through their problems, and working toward reconciliation.

And one particular cause of divorce was - as the gospel spread, and as people came to Christ - sometimes only one spouse believed, and the other did not. Evangelism created mixed marriages. And the solution (often) was to divorce. It was bad theology of marriage!

Cultural Background:

In terms of the culture that was feeding their theology of marriage; divorce was the norm. Divorces were easily obtained by either the husband or the wife. Even among Jews, thought they were a little more conservative, certain Rabbis allowed for divorces for nearly any reason.

And little had changed over time. Craig Blomberg in his commentary wrote, “The divorce and remarriage statistics, of course, continue to grow and stagger the imagination.” A 2008 George Barna poll concluded that yet again: “When born again Christians are combined into an aggregate...their divorce figure is statistically identical to that of non-born again adults.” Our behavior reveals that our theology comes from the world, and not from the Bible. God’s word says, “don’t divorce – stay married.” The World says, “divorce for any reason,” and most people choose the later.

Paul’s Response:

Paul responds in verse twelve: [1Cor. 7:12](#) But to the rest I say, not the Lord, that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he must not divorce her. Don’t be so quick to run to divorce as an option. If the unbelieving spouse can adjust and adapt, stay married. [1Cor. 7:13](#) And a woman who has an unbelieving husband, and he consents to live with her, she must not send her husband away. Why? [1Cor. 7:14](#) For the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her believing husband; for otherwise your children are unclean, but now they are holy.

Ok – we have to get our walking stick and go down a rabbit trail for a few minutes. *What does that mean?* In what sense does a believing spouse sanctify, or make holy, the others in the family? This is one of the most debated verses in the NT, and we do not have time to go through the fourteen different interpretive options that one of my commentaries presented.

So briefly here is my take on it. I do not believe Paul is saying all family members are somehow automatically saved because of the believing spouse. I also do not believe Paul is making a case for infant baptism. I also do not think we should take this as a green light for those who are already Christians to marry non-believers.

What is clear is this: If believing and unbelieving spouses can work it out – it will be a great blessing to the unsaved family members. Here is how it works. When the gospel is lived out in a humble, wise manner, it is always attractive. It is a pleasant odor. And that can't help but have a positive influence on the unbelieving partner and the children. The holiness language speaks to a movement toward godliness that, Lord willing, one day will result in the spouse and children accepting Jesus as well. Blomberg writes, "There is an infection about Christianity which involves all those who come into contact with it."

(Blomberg, 140). But of course that is not promised. Verse 15

1Cor. 7:15 Yet if the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave; the brother or the sister is not under bondage in such cases, but God has called us to peace. 1Cor. 7:16 For how do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife? In the case of marital abandonment by the unbelieving spouse (and there are other reasons for divorce not covered here), the covenant of marriage is broken and there is nothing more to be done, except to be reminded that we cannot force salvation upon our family members, and to put it in the hands of our sovereign God.

Application

What is our application? If you are married I exhort you to make your marriage a priority. It is more important than your career. More important than your parenting. More important than your involvement in church. More important than anything else you have going. Like you, I am often guilty of putting my marriage on the back seat because of pressing responsibilities in other areas. I talked with a seminary friend who told me they knew three seminary students who received at graduation not only a master's degree but a divorce certificate as well, because they put their seminary studies ahead of their marriages. Let us all be reminded that marriage is a creation of God, entrusted to us to care for, not to break apart.

But when divorce comes to you, please get help. Some of you may be thinking of divorce, or going through a divorce. Talk to me or one of the elders and let's do everything we can before considering divorce. It doesn't always happen, I understand that, but I have seen marriages on the brink of divorce move back toward reconciliation when given the help they need. Again, we have not had to time go through every teaching on divorce and remarriage, which is all the more reasons to get help when your marriage is facing great trials.

I want to, also by way of application, encourage you to read on the back of the handout, church's statement on marriage and divorce found in our Relational Commitments (page 5). Of all the topics in our relational commitments, we spent the most time on this page, carefully wording and expressing what we believe in a biblical theology of marriage, divorce and remarriage.

Stay as You Are (17-24)

Paul ends our text today with a final exhortation. Listen to his repetition. Verse 17: **Only, as the Lord has assigned to each one, as God has called each, in this manner let him walk. And so I direct in all the churches.** Verse 20: **Each man must remain in that condition in which he was called.** Verse 24: **Brethren, each one is to remain with God in that *condition* in which he was called.**

Paul closes with a call to slow down. Don't jump to conclusions. Paul's exhortation is consistent with the Bible's warnings against us being rash and impulsive. And sometimes new believers or those who rededicate their lives to Christ do just that – they are ready to sell the farm and move to Africa as a missionary, or to divorce, or go to seminary or to go anywhere except where they are. But, more often than not God uses us right where we are at.

If you were a police officer before you came to Christ – now be a Christian police officer. If you were an accountant, unless God very specifically says something to you – now be an accountant for Christ. If you were single and married – slave or free person, Jew or Gentile when salvation came – stay where you are – honor Christ right there.

Summary:

We have been talking about a proper theology of marriage. A theology based on God's word and not shaped by our own experiences or the world's values. I would challenge each one of us to consider whether our view of sexuality and marriage is shaped more by God's word or by the culture.

Conclusion

When Ann Lee came to the United States, she did have the opportunity to start her own religion. She first began to have visions and dreams. And she began teaching things so radical that she was kicked out of the Quaker fellowship, and started her own movement called "The Shakers." I first heard about the Shakers in my church history class in seminary.

Well, Ann, through her dreams presented herself as the female equivalent of Christ. She was finally the powerful woman she desired to be. She held complete authority in the church. In their meetings they would dance and shake their bodies to attain spiritual perfection. But two prominent pieces of theology dominated this movement. The first was gender equality and the second was a complete rejection of sexuality and 100% celibacy in marriage. Can you see how Ann Lee let her tragedies and sorrows shape religion in her own image. Her husband abandoned the marriage, and while the new group tried to grow through adult conversions and adoption of orphans – a religion that does not allow procreation is destined to fail, as hers did.

It was a sad experiment of a tragic woman trying to figure out the difficulties of life by looking inside herself, rather than looking to God. Let us not make the same mistake. The answers to life, no matter how hard are found here, in the Bible. Don't change God to fit your needs. Rather take your needs to a God who does not change and let Him change you. Let's pray.