

Bought With a Price: A Sermon

1 Corinthians 7:1-9



Sometimes a preacher looks at the lectionary passages and finds himself tempted to preach on the Psalm. I am going to look at the 1 Corinthians passage this morning – precisely because it is such a difficult passage, and precisely because it is so misunderstood. The apostle Paul is sometimes accused of being a misogynist sexist and of being against sex in general – and some consider this first verse in 1 Corinthians 7 as a prime example because it has both – a negative statement about women and a negative statement about sex. But modern commentators tell us that this is almost certainly a misreading. The clue is what comes first in the passage: “Now concerning the matters about which you wrote.” In 1 Cor. 7-8, Paul is responding to a letter that has been written to him by the Corinthians in which they ask a number of questions. What follows is his response to these questions.

In chapter 7, verse 1, most scholars agree that Paul is almost certainly quoting from the Corinthians’ letter to him. In the original Greek, the sentence can either be a statement or a question. So the Corinthians were either offering their opinion: “It is good for a man not to touch a woman,” or asking the question “Is it good for a man not to touch a

woman?" In light perhaps of Paul's own example of celibacy, and perhaps in response to Paul's warnings not to follow the bad examples of pagan culture, some of the Corinthians apparently thought that it might be good advice to avoid sex altogether – perhaps even for married people.

In the section from this morning's lectionary, Paul is actually responding to questions about two different groups of people. The first group is married couples; the second group are widows and, perhaps likely, widowers.¹ In today's passage, Paul is then dealing with two sets of questions: 1) Is it better for married Christians to avoid having sexual relations with one another in order to devote themselves to prayer instead? 2) Should widows and widowers stay single? Throughout the rest of the chapter, Paul addresses other questions having to do with marriage or sexual practices: Can Christians get divorced? What about Christians who are married to non-Christians? Wouldn't it be better to separate from them? What about single people? Is it okay for them to marry or is it better to stay single? Finally, he addresses some other questions: What about slaves? Should they try to obtain their freedom? Is it okay to eat food that has been offered to idols?

When we look at Paul's responses to these questions, we notice a common pattern. First, Paul does not give absolute "yes" or "no" answers to these questions. Rather, in each case, Paul examines the question from different angles and poses both reasons for and reasons against. When discussing eating meat offered to idols, Paul points out that idols do not actually exist, and so there is no harm in eating this food. He says, "food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do." (1 Cor. 8:8). On the question of whether a slave should seek his or her freedom, he states that, generally, people should remain in the condition they are in when they become Christians; on the other hand, if slaves can get their freedom, they should avail themselves of

the opportunity (1 Cor. 7:17,21).

In this morning's passage, when Paul addresses the question of whether widows should re-marry, he suggests that it would be good for them to remain single and gives himself as an example, but if they cannot resist sexual temptation, it would be better to marry. As he says, "it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion." (1 Cor. 7:9).

In response to these married couples who thought that they were so high-minded that they could devote themselves to prayer and refrain from the less spiritual practices associated with marriage like having sex – Paul basically responds: "Don't try to be more spiritual than God!" God invented sex. Paul writes that because of sexual temptation each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband.² If they want to refrain from sex and devote themselves to prayer for awhile, that's fine, but only for a limited period, "so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control." (1 Cor. 7:5).

Paul also introduces a second principle – the principle of love for fellow Christians. We cannot make our decisions based on how they will affect us alone. So, in discussing the question of food offered to idols, we need to take into consideration that some with sensitive consciences might be scandalized by our behavior: "And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died." (1 Cor. 8:11). In discussing marriage, Paul points out that the first concern of husbands and wives needs to be their spouses. On the one hand, Paul states something that would not at all have been controversial in either Jewish or pagan culture at the time: "The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does." But then Paul says something that would have been truly shocking in ancient culture: "Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does." (1 Cor. 7:4). Paul

understands marriage to have an equality and a mutuality in which each member of the couple yields to the wishes of the other. This passage is one of the great challenges to those who read Paul as advocating some kind of absolute authority of husbands over wives, or men over women. Marriage is not about the control of one spouse over another, but of each spouse yielding to the wishes and needs of the other.

There is finally a third principle, and this is the most important one. Paul does indeed challenge the questions of the Corinthians, and he does introduce the notion of freedom and liberty. In some cases, there is no single right or wrong answer. He also points out that in making decisions, we need to take into consideration how our decisions affect others, and those decisions need to be affected by love and concern for the other's good. But Paul is not just telling people that it's okay to do your own thing as long as no one else gets hurt – which seems to be the common ethic of much of contemporary culture. Paul is not telling people that they need to be true to themselves.

Instead, Paul appeals to what we might call a Christological principle that is a key theme throughout his letter. In the first chapter, he criticizes those Corinthians who claimed to be following Apollos or Cephas or even himself by asking “Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?” (1 Cor. 1:13). He then reminds them that he preaches “Christ crucified,” which is foolishness to Jews and Greeks, but the wisdom of God and the power of God (1 Cor. 1:23-24).

In the context surrounding 1 Cor. 7, Paul appeals over and over again to the crucified Christ. In the chapter previous to the reading we read this morning, when Paul was warning about the danger of sexual immorality, he had reminded his listeners that they were bought with a price (1 Cor. 6:20). When addressing the question of freedom for slaves later in this morning's chapter, he again reminds his listeners that “You were bought with a price,” and states that “he who was free

when called is a slave of Christ," so "do not become slaves of men." (1 Cor. 7:22-23). When discussing meat offered to idols, Paul warns that when we wound someone's weak conscience, we sin against Christ (1 Cor. 8:12). And when discussing questions of sexual self-control in marriage and whether widowers should remarry, he reminds them: "Each one has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another." (1 Cor. 7:7).

Paul thus introduces the crucial point that all of our ethical decisions must flow out of our relationship with Christ and must reflect the pattern of his own death for us on the cross. We are not free to make our own decisions because we are being true to ourselves. The kind of freedom we have is the kind of freedom of those who do not belong to themselves; we are slaves of Christ because we have been bought with his blood. And it is because we have been bought with the blood of Christ that we exercise our freedom by being slaves to one another.

This recognition that we belong to Christ relativizes some of the things that our culture thinks are so important. Husbands and wives love and serve each other because we are mutually slaves of Christ, and so our bodies do not belong to ourselves but to one another. Sexual fulfillment is not the end-all and be-all that contemporary culture seems to think that it is because ultimately we do not find our identities either in sexuality or in sexual relationships with other persons, but in Christ. Whether we get married or stay single is not so important because in either case there are ways to be faithful servants of Christ. How we treat other people – both our fellow Christians and non-Christians – becomes radically transformed when we recognize that like ourselves, they are they also are those for whom Jesus Christ died. Career and income and status – perhaps the most important things in contemporary culture besides sexual fulfillment – are also not that important. What we own is not nearly so important as who owns us – we belong first and foremost to Christ who has paid for us with his blood. The cross of Christ is indeed

foolishness to those who think life is about being true to yourself – but as Paul wrote, to those of us who have been bought with Christ’s blood, the cross is the power of God and the wisdom of God.

1 Commentators note that the Greek word for “widowers” (*kheros*) is not found in the New Testament time period when *koine* Greek was being used. Paul’s word translated “unmarried” (*agamois*) is likely Paul’s word for “widowers.” Paul addresses the “never married” later.

2 Commentators point out that Paul’s reference to “having” a wife or husband is not referring to the practice of being married, but to “having” sexual relations; cf. 1 Cor. 5:1.