

Church Live Re-Visited: Session Seven - Part 3

by Ron Bailey

The sermon explores the biblical principles of marriage, emphasizing mutual respect, consent, and the grace needed for both single and married life.

Duration: 29:07

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 7:4

Topics: "Christian Marriage", "Sacrificial Love"

Description

This sermon delves into the biblical perspective on marriage, emphasizing the mutual responsibility of partners to honor and satisfy each other's needs rather than focusing on individual rights. It explores the concept of voluntary surrender and mutual consent in relationships, reflecting on the example of Christ's sacrificial love for his bride, the church. The speaker highlights the importance of embracing the cross, denying self, and yielding to God's grace in various life circumstances, whether single, married, or widowed.

Transcript

And then verse 3, and in my version it says this, let the husband render unto the wife due benevolence, which is a wonderful euphemism, and likewise also the wife unto her husband. I think in some versions it'll say conjugal rights. I think that's a shame.

It's talking about sexual relationships. And what it's doing is this, and please don't be offended, I want to be as kind of honest as I can to this scripture. It's recognising the fact that men and women have appetites, that they're God-given appetites, and that in marriage these appetites have a way in which they can be satisfied.

And what it's saying is this, and notice the wonderful way in which it says it. It says, let the husband render to the wife due benevolence. In other words, this isn't the husband saying, I have my rights.

This is the husband saying, I want to honour my wife's rights. So what you've got here, in each of these cases you're seeing, you've actually got the partner who is responsible for maintaining the rights of the other partner. You haven't got the man maintaining his rights, and you haven't got the woman maintaining her rights.

What you've got is the man maintaining the woman's rights, and you've got the woman maintaining the man's rights. I think this is just matchless wisdom, and a glorious example of the way that God does things. So what he says is this, he says, the husband must be thinking about the wife.

The husband must be considering the wife. He must be considering her appetites. He must render to her that that's necessary for the satisfaction of her appetites.

And the wife, she must render, she must give, she must render to the man the opportunity for his hungers to be satisfied. And then you come into this statement here in verse 4. This verse 4 is a wonderful recipe for paralysis. I'll explain what I mean in a minute.

The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband, and some might say, so the husband completes himself and do just exactly what he likes. Well, no, because there's another half of this sentence. The other half of the sentence says this, and likewise also the husband doesn't have power over his body, but the wife.

So what this means in fact is that there has to be all the time mutual consent between these two. There's no forcing of any rights on anybody. It's just a wonderful picture of what God intends.

You know that marriage is always kind of a picture of Christ and his bride. And it's a wonderful thing that even in our relationship, although we constantly yield ourselves to the Lord Jesus, he never actually demands his rights. He never demands his rights.

He stakes his claims. He tells you what he is, who he is. He tells you what he expects, but it's interesting.

Oswald Chambers used to make this point. He used to say that the cross is always voluntary. Now that might come as a surprise, but what he meant by this, he said, if any man will follow me, let him take up his cross.

In other words, you don't have to follow me, but if you follow me, these are the implications. So discipleship in a sense is voluntary. It depends on whether you want it.

There are conditions to it, but it's not forced upon you. And this relationship is voluntary. It's not forced upon you.

And the relationship with the Lord is like that. I remember an old Pentecostal preacher that was a great blessing to me as a young man. And he used to say, maybe only an Englishman could say this, but he used to say, you know, God's a real gentleman, which is a quaint kind of a thing.

But what he meant is that although God has absolute sovereign rights of God, and God speaks things which have to obey, ultimately, we have to yield. He does not beat us into submission. He does not beat us into submission.

It has to be a willing choice. We have to be willing to bow the knee. Ultimately, the whole human race will be forced to bow the knee.

But in this stage of events, it's not forced. It's the choice they make. As I read this passage and read it and reread it, I was just amazed at the tenderness of this passage.

We don't actually know what Paul's condition was. At a certain point here, whether I can see it, yes, in verse 6, in chapter 7, Paul says this. He says, I speak this by permission and not by commandment, for I would that all men were even as I myself.

And you say, well, now here I'd like some more information, because it really would be very helpful to know what Paul's marital state was. Where was Mrs. Paul? Was there a Mrs. Paul? It looks from the scripture that Paul had been a member of the Sanhedrin. And a member of the Sanhedrin by law had to be married.

So if Paul was a member of the Sanhedrin, at some point he must have had a wife. Now, has his wife died? We really don't know. The Jews have a forgotten number.

I think it's 614 laws. And the first one is, be fruitful and multiply. So it's actually a commandment that can arrest upon every Jewish man to get married and to create children, if it's at all possible.

So there may even have been some children of Paul. We just don't know. There's a big gap here.

And Paul says, I wish it would be over. So the possibility is that he was single and never married. Jesus certainly never married.

Was he single or was he married and was he widowed? Was he married and divorced? Does that challenge it? Does that kind of offend you? Let me show you something from - this is speculation. But I just want to show you something. If you look at Philippians, Paul gives a testimony in Philippians.

In Philippians chapter 3. I'll read from verse 7. You know this passage pretty well, I think. Chapter 3, verse 7. But what things were gained to me, those I counted loss. Notice his language.

I counted them loss. I reckoned them loss. And then he says this.

Yea, doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things. He's not now saying I reckon all things to be lost. He's actually now saying I've lost everything.

Now we know that Paul was a Roman citizen and that he was born as a Roman citizen. That may well mean that his father either provided the Romans with some significant service or paid for it at great price. It may indicate that Paul came from a very wealthy family.

It may well be that when Paul converted and became a Christian, he was cut off from his family inheritance. It may well be that he was cut off from his entire family. I can remember meeting a young man in India years and years ago.

He was a Brahmin, that's the priestly class, the highest of the castes in India. And he was converted and he went home and he told his wife and his family that he converted. And his wife took the children out of the house and he never saw them again.

That's the cost. That's the cost. It may be that Paul suffered the loss of all things and that part of what he lost was his wife.

We just, we don't know. We don't know. There's a thing that Paul says a little bit later on when he talks about kind of being virgin.

In chapter 7, in chapter 7 verse 25, he talks about, I'll explain what I think it means by virgins in a minute. Chapter 7, verse 25. Now concerning virgins I have no commandment of the Lord, yet I give my judgment as one that has obtained mercy of the Lord to be faithful.

Now what does that mean? Does Paul mean that he's going to talk about virgins here and he himself is a virgin and has found God's faithfulness enabling him to maintain his virgin state? Or does he mean that what he's saying now is he believes his judgment is reliable because God has given him grace to be faithful in his judgments? I don't know. It's just possible. What I'm really saying is we don't know lots of the things that we might like to know about Paul.

But obviously Paul was without a partner because a little bit later on we'll find that he talks about some of the apostles having wives and their wives travelling with the apostles in the work of their ministry. And Paul makes this question, he says, is it only Barnabas and myself who don't have a right to have a wife travelling with us as a sister? It's an amazing thing and I've said this through all our studies in 1 Corinthians. You don't always see the word but notice how often the idea of my rights comes up in Corinthians.

The man's rights, the woman's rights, my right to myself. Notice how we said last time we were together that some of the young men may well have said well my body has appetites, I have rights for my appetites to be satisfied, I can go and use the prostitute. It doesn't mean anything, it has no significance.

It's a right. Later on you'll see Paul talks about people kind of claiming their rights. And all the way through 1 Corinthians you've got this underlying theme that the Corinthians were behaving in an independent way in which they were, and again I'm quoting Oswald Chambers' language, they were maintaining their right to themselves.

Ultimately they said my life is my own, I will kind of live my life in the way that I want to live it and that's all that matters. And it was destroying the church. It's the big problem in the church economy.

He begins, Paul begins by saying every one of you says I. I am of Apollos, I of Cephas, and I, and I, and I, and he emphasises the I in the original language every single time. It's as though the summary of what's gone wrong in the Corinthian church is every single one of you has reverted to your own right to judge your own life, to judge your own actions, and actually to judge your own church, because you'll find several times in 1 Corinthians that Paul has to remind the Corinthians that they're not the only church, that there are other churches. And I teach this, Paul says, in all the churches, and this is unknown in all the other churches.

And you've got this fierce independence of the Corinthians, and it's coming through here again. But here in this first little section, when we read about the marriage as God sees it, you've got the laying down of the I, you've got the laying down of the self, you've got the saying no to myself and yes to somebody else. And really the answer to everything that had gone wrong in the Corinthian church was the teaching of the cross, to embrace the cross, not the cross in terms of Christ dying for our sin, but the cross in terms of me laying down my right to myself.

Jesus bore his cross once. We are expected, if we're going to be disciples, to bear our cross, not his, our cross daily. That will go on, and on, and on, and on, as we say no to ourselves and yes to God.

And the Corinthians were not doing any of that. And you see this idea here, so it's this. Now go back to verse 25, and I want to say something.

There's a version of the Bible called the ESV, which is a kind of an evangelical RSV. And at this point they actually say, now concerning the betrothed. And it's interesting because this is another of those now concerning.

So what we've got here, beginning at verse 25, is an answer to a question. But we haven't got the question. So we're trying to understand what the question might have been.

And if you read through this, it may well be, this is what you call a hypothesis. You have an idea and you think, could it have been like this? And you can't say definitely, yes, it was like this. But all you can say is, yes, this would fit the point, this would fit the story as far as we get it.

It may have been that part of the question that came to Paul was, well, okay, we've heard you say before things like, it's probably better to stay single if you are single. But what happens if you've already betrothed to somebody? What happens if you've already started the process? The betrothal service, the Jewish betrothal service, was a very complete service. In fact, the only thing in which it differed from marriage was the sexual union.

When the person was betrothed to somebody else, to break that contract needed a divorce. And if the person was found to break that contract, they were stoned to death, just as an adulteress was stoned to death. So these were sort of the patterns.

It was a very strong thing. It was only in the bed, as they would have said, that marriage differed from betrothal. So if these people have been betrothed, it actually even affected things like next of kin and inheritance rights.

So once you were betrothed to somebody, your mother or your brother weren't your next of kin, your betrothed partner was your next of kin. And that's, marriage is the same in this country, it's also next of kin. That's why the law insists that it's done properly and the records are kept so careful.

He says this then, let's put that word in just in case it was there. Now concerning the betrothed, I have no commandment of the Lord, yet I give my judgment as one that's obtained mercy of the Lord to be faithful. I suppose therefore that this is good for the present distress.

I say that it is good for a man so to be. And then Paul says this, he says, he goes on and he actually says, remain in the relationship that you're in. If you're not in a relationship, don't begin one.

If you're betrothed and you want to be married, that's fine. You won't sin if you marry. He's making this very, very plain to these people.

There are other things that we can see coming in in Corinthians, and we know they were in existence in the early church. A thing called asceticism. Asceticism means that you deprive yourself of things because you think by doing that you acquire merit and you become better and you become more acceptable with God.

So asceticism, the monks in kind of Catholicism, actually in Celtic Christianity as well, the monks were ascetics. That's to say they would deprive themselves. They would suffer because they believed it helped

their spiritual condition.

So they would go on long fasts. They would walk up and down mountains with no shoes on their feet. They would whip themselves until they bled.

They would wear hair shirts. There are actually people who still do this. We've actually got a member of our government, as you probably know, who actually wears something which causes her constant pain as part of this Catholic kind of notion of things.

I won't put it on the tape. I'll tell you who it is later. This asceticism, this if I suffer it's better, it's part of what they call mysticism.

And mysticism is the idea that you don't actually repent. You're just infused by God and God kind of takes you over and you just become kind of melted into you and God so there's no separation. But mystics believe that suffering can deal with sin.

They believe it can get rid of sin. They believe it can hinder sin. And we know that that was happening in part of the early church.

So it may well be that there were some people who were saying well what we need to do is always choose the hardest path because that's best for us. We've actually got hymns written by mystic ascetics in our hymn book that we sing. Shall I tell you one of them? There's a line in one of Faber's hymns which says something like God's will is best for him when it triumphs at his cost.

Now maybe you, that's, is it something like that Graham? God's will is sweetest to him when it triumphs at his cost. And F.W. Faber who was an Anglican who became a Catholic is actually saying that the will of God is best if it hurts most. Now that is not the teaching of the Bible.

That is the teaching of the ascetics. And that was kind of, that was beginning to creep into the church and several times particularly in the Colossian letter you'll find that Paul kind of talks about this things he calls will worship where people were denying themselves just to prove a point because it showed who was in control. It's all kind of part of it.

But he goes on here and he says just stay in the condition that you are. If you marry, if you're betrothed, you've not sinned. Actually if you're not betrothed and you marry, you haven't sinned.

But I'm giving my counsel, says Paul, and I'm giving my counsel on this basis because I believe God has given me grace to be faithful and because, and this is a key thing here, you read it in verse 26, for the present distress. This is another thing that we need to factor in to our interpretation. Obviously this was a time of distress for the church in Corinth and Paul knew, as it kind of comes out in other letters, Paul knew that the time of persecution was going to become more intense.

It was going to become harder for the Christians. And what Paul was doing was he wanted to spare them as many anxieties as possible. He didn't want them to suffer unnecessarily.

He wanted them to live their lives and he uses this little phrase and I use this phrase with my wife sometimes when he says, the unmarried, where is it, here it is, verse 35, I speak for your own profit, not that I may cast a snare upon you, he doesn't want to add burdens on them, but for that which is comely and that you may attend upon the Lord without distraction. And I often call her my little distraction but she's

a very happy distraction. She's God's distraction for me.

But what Paul is saying here, yes, you can be single-minded if you're a single person. Actually, you will learn things in marriage that you will never learn when you're single. There's a whole new kind of ball game there, all kinds of things.

I don't want to be cynical, but there are tremendous advantages to be married. You need to be single to see them usually, just like there are lots of advantages to being single, but you need to be married before you kind of recognize them very often. No, I'm being cynical, I'm just joking.

These are different things, and one of the things that Paul said that I didn't mention, I'll just draw your attention to it, in verse chapter 7, when he'd said that I would that all men were as myself, he says this, but every man has his proper gift from God, one after this manner and another after that, and the staggering thing is that the word he uses for gift is charismata, gift of the Spirit. So there's a gift that you often don't hear referred to in the list that you get further on. But you see, these are grace gifts.

The list that we have later on is not so that you can slap labels on activities of the Spirit. It's just to show you the diversity of the way in which the Spirit of God works, and one of the ways in which the Spirit of God works is giving specific grace for specific situations. When Peter writes his letter, he talks about praying with your wives and being gentle to the weaker vessel that you may be heirs together of, and my old English version says the manifold grace of God, and the Greek word for manifold is actually variegated.

If you're into gardening, they sometimes talk about a plant leaf being variegated. It means it's got lots of colours and lots of shapes to it. It means multifaceted.

That's variegated. And Peter talks about the variegated grace of God. And earlier on in the letter, he talks about not being surprised if you get manifold temptations, and that's variegated as well.

So your temptations are variegated, but there is an exact brand of variegated grace to meet the variegated trial that you go through. You'll have a particular kind of trial if you're single, but there's grace for it. You'll have another kind of trial if you're married, but there's grace for it.

That's what Paul is saying here. This is the enabling of God. And of course, this is interesting, some people say that the gifts and the callings of God are without repentance, but a single person might have grace to be single, and then they'll be married, and then they'll need grace to be married.

And sadly, statistically, most ladies who are married will become widows, because the men tend to die before the women do, so they will need to find grace again to be single. So this isn't fixed grace. This is different grace at different times.

And this is really what Paul brings out. And I want to say that before we get into the... We'll do this next time, and I knew we would. The nitty-gritty of what the implications are of marriage and divorce, we will do in two weeks' time.

But I want to leave these ideas in your mind from the first few chapters of chapter 7, which really start in the last verse of chapter 6, where Paul says this. For you are bought with a price, therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit. See that little phrase in verse 20 of chapter 6? You are bought with a price.

Now look at chapter 7 and verse 23. You are bought with a price. The whole theme of this section is Paul actually telling these people at Corinth that they don't belong to themselves anymore.

Their body is not theirs, so they can do with it what they want to. Their wife isn't theirs, so they can do with it as they want to. Nothing is theirs.

Everything is the Lord's. All things are yours, says Paul, and you are Christ, and Christ is God. But that is belongingness, not ownership and rights.

Our responsibility... It's a little bit like justice. Have you heard the saying that in life you should always give justice, but not necessarily expect it? And in life you should always honour people's rights, but not necessarily expect them. You must certainly not demand them.

We have no right to demand our rights. That's all gone to the cross, and that's the secret of this. But there's this glorious little picture at the beginning of a husband and wife in this mutual relationship where each one is actually all the time thinking of the other partner, not thinking of how they can get their will achieved, but all the time thinking of the well-being, the benevolence, the comfort of the other person.

And then this thing right at the end here where he just reassures that he's not laying unnecessary burdens. He just wants them to have as simple a life as possible in the distress, in the coming distress, the trials that are coming, but knowing that God will give the grace. Let's just pray.

If there are any questions, we can ask them after we've prayed. Lord, we live in a sordid world. We live in a world which is spoiled and where your best gifts have been most spoiled.

And the things that you design to be the greatest blessing to men and women are the things that the enemy has taken and vandalized so that they become the greatest burden and pain to men and women. I want to pray, Lord, if there are any here for whom this is necessary, I want to pray grace for the single ones. I want to pray grace for the married ones.

I want to pray grace for the widowed ones. I believe, Lord, that this is your provision, that in every state of our lives there are no accidents to those who are your children, but there is just exactly the right grace to meet the right need. And I pray, Lord, that you will help us to look not on our own things, but on the things of others, in our marriages, in our church, not to be anxious to maintain our own rights, but to be anxious to honour the rights and the privileges of others.

And so glorify your name. Lord, will you work out the miracle of the life of Jesus Christ on earth, in your church, in our relationships, for his glory. Amen.

Thank you.

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