

1 Corinthians 7:1-2

by St. John Chrysostom

St. John Chrysostom explores the complexities of marriage and virginity, emphasizing mutual respect and the sanctity of marital relationships.

Topics: "Marital Unity", "Spiritual Purity"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches about the importance of marriage, virginity, and continence, emphasizing the need for mutual respect and honor between husbands and wives. He addresses the challenges faced in relationships, such as fornication, infidelity, and the balance between personal desires and God's commandments. Chrysostom highlights the significance of remaining faithful to one's spouse, seeking unity in marriage, and the potential for salvation through marital relationships. He also encourages believers to prioritize spiritual pursuits over worldly concerns, whether in marriage or in virginity, to serve the Lord without distraction.

Transcript

Now concerning the things whereof ye wrote to me: it is good for a man not to touch a woman. But because of fornications, let each man have his own wife; and let each woman have her own husband.

Having corrected the three heaviest things laid to their charge, one, the distraction of the Church, another, about the fornicator, a third, about the covetous person, he thenceforth uses a milder sort of speech. And he interposes some exhortation and advice about marriage and virginity, giving the hearers some respite from more unpleasant subjects. But in the second Epistle he does the contrary; he begins from the milder topics, and ends with the more distressing. And here also, after he has finished his discourse about virginity, he again launches forth into matter more akin to reproof; not setting all down in regular order, but varying his discourse in either kind, as the occasion required and the exigency of the matters in hand.

Wherefore he says, Now concerning the things whereof ye wrote unto me. For they had written to him, Whether it was right to abstain from one's wife, or not: and writing back in answer to this and giving rules about marriage, he introduces also the discourse concerning virginity: It is good for a man not to touch a woman. For if, says he, thou enquire what is the excellent and greatly superior course, it is better not to have any connection whatever with a woman: but if you ask what is safe and helpful to your own infirmity, be connected by marriage.

But since it was likely, as also happens now, that the husband might be willing but the wife not, or perhaps the reverse, mark how he discusses each case. Some indeed say that this discourse was addressed by him to priests. But I, judging from what follows, could not affirm that it was so: since he would not have given his advice in general terms. For if he were writing these things only for the priests, he would have said, It is good for the teacher not to touch a woman. But now he has made it of universal application, saying, It is good for a man; not for priest only. And again, Are you loosed from a wife? Seek not a wife. He said not, You who are a priest and teacher, but indefinitely. And the whole of his speech goes on entirely in the same tones. And in saying, Because of fornications, let every man have his own wife by the very cause alleged for the concession he guides men to continence.

1 Corinthians 7:3-4

2. Let the husband pay the wife the honor due to her: in like manner the wife the husband.

Now what is the meaning of the due honor? The wife has not power over her own body; but is both the slave and the mistress of the husband. And if you decline the service which is due, you have offended God. But if you wish to withdraw yourself, it must be with the husband's permission, though it be but a for short time. For this is why he calls the matter a debt, to show that no one is master of himself but that they are servants to each other.

When therefore you see an harlot tempting you, say, My body is not mine, but my wife's. The same also let the woman say to those who would undermine her chastity, My body is not mine, but my husband's.

Now if neither husband nor wife has power even over their own body, much less have they over their property. Hear ye, all that have husbands and all that have wives: that if you must not count your body your own, much less your money.

Elsewhere I grant He gives to the husband abundant precedence, both in the New Testament, and the Old saying, (אִתְּךָ יִשְׁרָאֵל יִשְׁרָאֵל לְבָרְכֶךָ לְבָרְכֶךָ לְבָרְכֶךָ... LXX. Genesis 3:16.) Your turning shall be towards your husband, and he shall rule over you. Paul does so too by making a distinction thus, and writing, Ephesians 5:25-33 Husbands, love your wives; and let the wife see that she reverence her husband. But in this place we hear no more of greater and less, but it is one and the same right. Now why is this? Because his speech was about chastity. In all other things, says he, let the husband have the prerogative; but not so where the question is about chastity. The husband has no power over his own body, neither the wife. There is great equality of honor, and no prerogative.

1 Corinthians 7:5-9

3. Defraud ye not one the other, except it be by consent.

What then can this mean? Let not the wife, says he, exercise continence, if the husband be unwilling; nor yet the husband without the wife's consent. Why so? Because great evils spring from this sort of continence. For adulteries and fornications and the ruin of families have often arisen from hence. For if when men have their own wives they commit fornication, much more if you defraud them of this consolation. And well says he, Defraud not; fraud here, and debt above, that he might show the strictness of the right of dominion in question. For that one should practice continence against the will of the other is defrauding; but not so, with the other's consent: any more than I count myself defrauded, if after persuading me you take away any thing of mine. Since only he defrauds who takes against another's will

and by force. A thing which many women do, working sin rather than righteousness, and thereby becoming accountable for the husband's uncleanness, and rending all asunder. Whereas they should value concord above all things, since this is more important than all beside.

We will, if you please, consider it with a view to actual cases. Thus, suppose a wife and husband, and let the wife be continent, without consent of her husband; well then, if hereupon he commit fornication, or though abstaining from fornication fret and grow restless and be heated and quarrel and give all kind of trouble to his wife; where is all the gain of the fasting and the continence, a breach being made in love? There is none. For what strange reproaches, how much trouble, how great a war must of course arise! since when in a house man and wife are at variance, the house will be no better off than a ship in a storm when the master is upon ill terms with the man at the head. Wherefore he says, Defraud not one another, unless it be by consent for a season, that you may give yourselves unto prayer. It is prayer with unusual earnestness which he here means. For if he is forbidding those who have intercourse with one another to pray, how could pray without ceasing have any place? It is possible then to live with a wife and yet give heed unto prayer. But by continence prayer is made more perfect. For he did not say merely, That ye may pray; but, That ye may give yourselves unto it; as though what he speaks of might cause not uncleanness but much occupation.

And may be together again, that Satan tempt you not. Thus lest it should seem to be a matter of express enactment, he adds the reason. And what is it? That Satan tempt you not. And that you may understand that it is not the devil only who causes this crime, I mean adultery, he adds, because of your incontinency.

But this I say by way of permission, not of commandment. For I would that all men were even as I myself; in a state of continence. This he does in many places when he is advising about difficult matters; he brings forward himself, and says, Be imitators of me.

Howbeit each man has his own gift from God, one after this manner, and another after that. Thus since he had heavily charged them saying, for your incontinence, he again comforts them by the words, each one has his own gift of God; not declaring that towards that virtue there is no need of zeal on our part, but, as I was saying before, to comfort them. For if it be a gift, and man contributes nothing thereunto, how do you say, But 1 Corinthians 7:8 I say to the unmarried and to widows, it is good for them if they abide even as I: 1 Corinthians 7:9 but if they have not continency let them marry? Do you see the strong sense of Paul how he both signifies that continence is better, and yet puts no force on the person who cannot attain to it; fearing lest some offense arise?

For it is better to marry than to burn. He indicates how great is the tyranny of concupiscence. What he means is something like this: If you have to endure much violence and burning desire, withdraw yourself from your pains and toils, lest haply you be subverted.

1 Corinthians 7:10-11

4. But to the married I give charge, yet not I, but the Lord.

Because it is a law expressly appointed by Christ which he is about to read to them about the not putting away a wife without fornication; Matthew 5:32, 19:9; Mark 10:11; Luke 16:18 therefore he says, Not I. True it is what was before spoken though it were not expressly stated, yet it also is His decree. But this, you see, He had delivered in express words. So that the words I and not I have this difference of meaning. For that you might not imagine even his own words to be human, therefore he added, For I think that I also

have the Spirit of God.

Now what is that which to the married the Lord commanded? That the wife depart not from her husband: 1 Corinthians 7:11 but if she depart, let her remain unmarried, or be reconciled unto her husband. Here, seeing that both on the score of continence and other pretexts, and because of infirmities of temper, (ἵνα ἡ ἀποστολή... ἵνα ἡ ἀποστολή,) it fell out that separations took place: it were better, he says, that such things should not be at all; but however if they take place, let the wife remain with her husband, if not to cohabit with him, yet so as not to introduce any other to be her husband.

1 Corinthians 7:12-14

But to the rest speak I, not the Lord. If any brother have a wife that believes not, and she is content to dwell with him, let him not leave her. And if any woman has an husband that believes not, and he is content to dwell with her, let her not leave him.

For as when discoursing about separating from fornicators, he made the matter easy by the correction which he applied to his words, saying, Howbeit, not altogether with the fornicators of this world; so also in this case he provides for the abundant easiness of the duty, saying, If any wife have a husband, or husband a wife, that believes not, let him not leave her. What do you say? If he be an unbeliever, let him remain with the wife, but not if he be a fornicator? And yet fornication is a less sin than unbelief. I grant, fornication is a less sin: but God spares your infirmities extremely. And this is what He does about the sacrifice, saying, Matthew 5:24 Leave the sacrifice, and be reconciled to your brother. This also in the case of the man who owed ten thousand talents. For him too He did not punish for owing him ten thousand talents, but for demanding back a hundred pence from his fellow-servant He took vengeance on him.

Then lest the woman might fear, as though she became unclean because of intercourse with her husband, he says, For the unbelieving husband is sanctified in the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified in the husband. And yet, if he that is joined to an harlot is one body, it is quite clear that the woman also who is joined to an idolater is one body. Well: it is one body; nevertheless she becomes not unclean, but the cleanness of the wife overcomes the uncleanness of the husband; and again, the cleanness of the believing husband overcomes the uncleanness of the unbelieving wife.

How then in this case is the uncleanness overcome, and therefore the intercourse allowed; while in the woman who prostitutes herself, the husband is not condemned in casting her out? Because here there is hope that the lost member may be saved through the marriage; but in the other case the marriage has already been dissolved; and there again both are corrupted; but here the fault is in one only of the two. I mean something like this: she that has been guilty of fornication is utterly abominable: if then he that is joined to an harlot is one body, he also becomes abominable by having connection with an harlot; wherefore all the purity flits away. But in the case before us it is not so. But how? The idolater is unclean but the woman is not unclean. For if indeed she were a partner with him in that wherein he is unclean, I mean his impiety, she herself would also become unclean. But now the idolater is unclean in one way, and the wife holds communion with him in another wherein he is not unclean. For marriage and mixture of bodies is that wherein the communion consists.

Again, there is a hope that this man may be reclaimed by his wife for she is made completely his own: but for the other it is not very easy. For how will she who dishonored him in former times and became another's and destroyed the rights of marriage, have power to reclaim him whom she had wronged; him,

5. And again, Only as God has distributed to each man, as the Lord has called each, so let him walk. Was any one called being circumcised? Let him not become uncircumcised. Was any called in uncircumcision? Let him not be circumcised. Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing; but the keeping of the commandments of God. Let each man abide in that calling wherein he was called. Were you called, being a slave? Care not for it. These things contribute nothing unto faith, says he. Be not then contentious neither be troubled; for the faith has cast out all these things.

Let each man abide in that calling wherein he was called. Have you been called, having an unbelieving wife? Continue to have her. Cast not out your wife for the faith's sake. Have you been called, being a slave? Care not for it. Continue to be a slave. Have you been called, being in uncircumcision? Remain uncircumcised. Being circumcised, did you become a believer? Continue circumcised. For this is the meaning of, As God has distributed unto each man. For these are no hindrances to piety. You are called, being a slave; another, with an unbelieving wife; another, being circumcised.

Astonishing! Where has he put slavery? As circumcision profits not: and uncircumcision does no harm; so neither does slavery, nor yet liberty. And that he might point out this with surpassing clearness, he says, But even (ἴ̄ἰ»ἰ»' ἰ̄μá½ἡ ἰ̄ṱ±á½ἡ ἰ̄ἱ...ἰ̄½ἰ̄-ἰ̄fἰ±ἰ̄') if you can become free, use it rather: that is, rather continue a slave. Now upon what possible ground does he tell the person who might be set free to remain a slave? He means to point out that slavery is no harm but rather an advantage.

Now we are not ignorant that some say, the words, use it rather, are spoken with regard to liberty: interpreting it, if you can become free, become free. But the expression would be very contrary to Paul's manner if he intended this. For he would not, when consoling the slave and signifying that he was in no respect injured, have told him to get free. Since perhaps some one might say, What then, if I am not able? I am an injured and degraded person. This then is not what he says: but as I said, meaning to point out that a man gets nothing by being made free, he says, Though you have it in your power to be made free, remain rather in slavery.

Next he adds also the cause; For he that was called in the Lord being a bondservant, is the Lord's free man: likewise he that was called, being free, is Christ's bondservant. For, says he, in the things that relate to Christ, both are equal: and like as you are the slave of Christ, so also is your master. How then is the slave a free man? Because He has freed you not only from sin, but also from outward slavery while continuing a slave. For he suffers not the slave to be a slave, not even though he be a man abiding in slavery: and this is the great wonder.

But how is the slave a free man while continuing a slave? When he is freed from passions and the diseases of the mind: when he looks down upon riches and wrath and all other the like passions.

1 Corinthians 7:23-24

You were bought with a price: become not bondservants of men. This saying is addressed not to slaves only but also to free men. For it is possible for one who is a slave not to be a slave; and for one who is a freeman to be a slave. And how can one be a slave and not a slave? When he does all for God: when he feigns nothing, and does nothing out of eye-service towards men: that is how one that is a slave to men can be free. Or again, how does one that is free become a slave? When he serves men in any evil service, either for gluttony or desire of wealth or for office' sake. For such an one, though he be free, is more of a slave than any man.

And consider both these points. Joseph was a slave but not a slave to men: wherefore even in slavery he was freer than all that are free. For instance, he yielded not to his mistress; yielded not to the purposes which she who possessed him desired. Again she was free; yet none ever so like a slave, courting and beseeching her own servant. But she prevailed not on him, who was free, to do what he would not. This then was not slavery; but it was liberty of the most exalted kind. For what impediment to virtue had he from his slavery? Let men hear, both slaves and free. Which was the slave? He that was entreated or she that did entreat? She that besought or he that despised her supplication?

In fact, there are limits set to slaves by God Himself; and up to what point one ought to keep them, has also been determined, and to transgress them is wrong. Namely, when your master commands nothing which is displeasing to God, it is right to follow and to obey; but no farther. For thus the slave becomes free. But if you go further, even though you are free you have become a slave. At least he intimates this, saying, Be not ye the servants of men.

But if this be not the meaning, if he bade them forsake their masters and strive contentiously to become free, in what sense did he exhort them, saying, Let each one remain in the calling in which he is called? And in another place, 1 Timothy 6:1-2 As many servants as are under the yoke, let them count their own masters worthy of all honor; and those that have believing masters, let them not despise them, because they are brethren who partake of the benefit. And writing to the Ephesians also and to the Colossians, he ordains and exacts the same rules. Whence it is plain that it is not this slavery which he annuls, but that which caused as it is by vice befalls free men also: and this is the worst kind of slavery, though he be a free man who is in bondage to it. For what profit had Joseph's brethren of their freedom? Were they not more servile than all slaves; both speaking lies to their father, and to the merchants using false pretences, as well as to their brother? But not such was the free man: rather every where and in all things he was true. And nothing had power to enslave him, neither chain nor bondage nor the love of his mistress nor his being in a strange land. But he abode free every where. For this is liberty in the truest sense when even in bondage it shines through.

6. Such a thing is Christianity; in slavery it bestows freedom. And as that which is by nature an invulnerable body then shows itself to be invulnerable when having received a dart it suffers no harm; so also he that is strictly free then shows himself, when even under masters he is not enslaved. For this cause his bidding is, remain a slave. But if it is impossible for one who is a slave to be a Christian such as he ought to be, the Greeks will condemn true religion of great weakness: whereas if they can be taught that slavery in no way impairs godliness, they will admire our doctrine. For if death hurt us not, nor scourges, nor chains, much less slavery. Fire and iron and tyrannies innumerable and diseases and poverty and wild beasts and countless things more dreadful than these, have not been able to injure the faithful; nay, they have made them even mightier. And how shall slavery be able to hurt? It is not slavery itself, beloved, that hurts; but the real slavery is that of sin. And if you be not a slave in this sense, be bold and rejoice. No one shall have power to do you any wrong, having the temper which cannot be enslaved. But if you be a slave to sin, even though thou be ten thousand times free you have no good of your freedom.

For, tell me, what profit is it when, though not in bondage to a man, you lie down in subjection to your passions? Since men indeed often know how to spare; but those masters are never satiated with your destruction. Are you in bondage to a man? Why, your master also is slave to you, in arranging about your food, in taking care of your health and in looking after your shoes and all the other things. And thou dost not fear so much less you should offend your master, as he fears lest any of those necessaries should fail

you. But he sits down, while you stand. And what of that? Since this may be said of you as well as of him. Often, at least, when you are lying down and sleeping sweetly, he is not only standing, but undergoing endless discomforts in the market-place; and he lies awake more painfully than thou.

For instance; what did Joseph suffer from his mistress to be compared with what she suffered from her evil desire? For he indeed did not the things which she wished to put upon him; but she performed every thing which her mistress ordered her, I mean her spirit of unchastity: which left not off until it had put her to open shame. What master commands such things? What savage tyrant? Intreat your slave, that is the word: flatter the person bought with your money, supplicate the captive; even if he reject you with disgust, again besiege him: even if you speak to him oftentimes, and he consent not, watch for his being alone, and force him, and become an object of derision. What can be more dishonorable, what more shameful, than these words? And if even by these means you make no progress, why, accuse him falsely and deceive your husband. Mark how mean, how shameful are the commands, how unmerciful and savage and frantic. What command does the master ever lay on his slave, such as those which her wantonness then laid upon that royal woman? And yet she dare not disobey. But Joseph underwent nothing of this sort, but every thing on the contrary which brought glory and honor.

Would you like to see yet another man under severe orders from a hard mistress, and without spirit to disobey any of them? Consider Cain, what commands were laid on him by his envy. She ordered him to slay his brother, to lie unto God, to grieve his father, to cast off shame; and he did it all, and in nothing refused to obey. And why marvel that over a single person so great should be the power of this mistress? She has often destroyed entire nations. For instance, the Midianitish women took the Jews, and all but bound them in captivity; their own beauty kindling desire, was the means of their vanquishing that whole nation. Paul then to cast out this sort of slavery, said, Become not servants of men; that is, Obey not men commanding unreasonable things: nay, obey not yourselves. Then having raised up their mind and made it mount on high, he says,

1 Corinthians 7:25-26

7. Now concerning virgins. I have no commandment of the Lord; but I give my judgment, as one that has obtained mercy of the Lord to be faithful.

Advancing on his way in regular order, he proceeds next to speak concerning virginity. For after that he had exercised and trained them, in his words concerning continence, he goes forth towards what is greater, saying, I have no commandment, but I esteem it to be good. For what reason? For the self-same reason as he had mentioned respecting continence.

1 Corinthians 7:27-34

Are you bound unto a wife? Seek not to be loosed. Are you loosed from a wife? Seek not a wife.

These words carry no contradiction to what had been said before but rather the most entire agreement with them. For he says in that place also, Except it be by consent: as here he says, Are you bound unto a wife? Seek not separation. This is no contradiction. For its being against consent makes a dissolution: but if with consent both live continently, it is no dissolution.

Then, lest this should seem to be laying down a law, he subjoins, 1 Corinthians 7:28 but if you marry, you have not sinned. He next alleges the existing state of things, the present distress, the shortness of the

time, and the affliction. For marriage draws along with it many things, which indeed he has glanced at, as well here as also in the discourse about continence: there, by saying, the wife has not power over herself; and here, by the expression, You are bound.

But if and thou marry, you have not sinned. He is not speaking about her who has made choice of virginity, for if it comes to that, she has sinned. Since if the widows are condemned for having to do with second marriages after they have once chosen widowhood, much more the virgins.

But such shall have trouble in the flesh. And pleasure too, you will say: but observe how he curtails this by the shortness of the time, saying, 1 Corinthians 7:28 the time is shortened; that is, we are exhorted to depart now and go forth, but you are running further in. And yet even although marriage had no troubles, even so we ought to press on towards things to come. But when it has affliction too, what need to draw on one's self an additional burden. What occasion to take up such a load, when even after taking it you must use it as having it not? For those even that have wives must be, he says, as though they had none.

Then, having interposed something about the future, he brings back his speech to the present. For some of his topics are spiritual; as that, the one cares about the things which be her husband's, the other about those which be God's. Others relate to this present life; as, I would have you to be free from cares. But still with all this he leaves it to their own choice: inasmuch as he who after proving what is best goes back to compulsion, seems as if he did not trust his own statements. Wherefore he rather attracts them by concession, and checks them as follows:

1 Corinthians 7:35

And this I say for your own profit, not that I may cast a snare upon you, but for that which is seemly, and that you may attend upon the Lord without distraction. Let the virgins hear that not by that one point is virginity defined; for she that is careful about the things of the world cannot be a virgin, nor seemly. Thus, when he said, There is difference between a wife and a virgin, he added this as the difference, and that wherein they are distinguished from each other. And laying down the definition of a virgin and her that is not a virgin, he names, not marriage nor continence but leisure from engagements and multiplicity of engagements. For the evil is not in the cohabitation, but in the impediment to the strictness of life.

1 Corinthians 7:36-40

But if any man think that he behaves himself unseemly toward his virgin.

Here he seems to be talking about marriage; but all that he says relates to virginity; for he allows even a second marriage, saying, only in the Lord. Now what means, in the Lord? With chastity, with honor: for this is needed every where, and must be pursued for else we cannot see God.

Now if we have passed lightly by what he says of virginity, let no one accuse us of negligence; for indeed an entire book has been composed by us upon this topic and as we have there with all the accuracy which we could, gone through every branch of the subject, we considered it a waste of words to introduce it again here. Wherefore, referring the hearer to that work as concerns these things, we will say this one thing here: We must follow after continence. For, says he, follow after peace, and the sanctification without which no one shall see the Lord. Therefore that we may be accounted worthy to see Him, whether we be in virginity or in the first marriage or the second, let us follow after this that we may obtain the kingdom of heaven, through the grace and loving-kindness of our Lord Jesus Christ; to Whom with the Father and the

Holy Spirit, be glory, power, honor, now, henceforth, and for everlasting ages. Amen.

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