One Man + One Woman

The sexual culture of first century Rome was very different than today. Let’s invest some time learning about it from Professor Joshua J. Mark in the World History Encyclopedia:

“Love, sex, and marriage in ancient Rome were defined by the patriarchy. The head of the household was the father who had complete control over the lives of his wife, children, and slaves. This paradigm was justified, in part, by one of the stories related to the foundational myth of Rome in which the demigods Romulus and Remus argue, Romulus kills Remus, and Romulus founds the city of Rome in 753 BCE.

“Shortly after this event (or just before), the Romans attacked neighboring tribes, taking their women, recounted as the famous Rape of the Sabine Women. These tribes then mounted a counterattack to win their women back but one of those taken – Hersila, who had become Romulus' wife – defended the Roman action to prevent needless deaths and encouraged the other women to do likewise. Whether the story reflects an actual historical event, it presents the paradigm of male-female relationships in ancient Rome: men held the power and women had to recognize that and respond accordingly. The social structure, informed by religion and tradition, dictated that men made the rules and women had to follow them.

“This was the paradigm of love, sex, and marriage in ancient Rome and, although there were certainly exceptions, the evidence strongly suggests that the experience of most married couples adhered to this model. Romantic love, although recognized and praised by the poets, played little part in many marriages although there is evidence of strong marriages based on mutual love and respect. Sex, as an expression of passionate love, is frequently associated with extramarital affairs but must have also been an important component of many marriages. Marriage was considered the foundation of society, in many cases – among the upper class – a kind of business transaction in which the purpose of sex was to produce children, and romantic love in a marriage was a kind of luxury some would enjoy but many others, apparently, would have to do without.

“Husbands, or males in general, were not held to these same standards of virtue and this was as true of sex as of any other aspect of male-female relationships. Men were free to and almost expected to engage in extramarital affairs with women, young boys, and other men as long as their partners were not freeborn Roman citizens. Sex was considered a natural and normal aspect of life, and there was no distinction between hetero- or homosexual sex – there was not even a linguistic recognition [in Latin, not Greek] of the concept of homosexuality being any different than heterosexuality – which could be enjoyed as long as those involved were both willing participants. Festivals such as “Lupercalia (celebrating fertility) involved open displays of sexuality and prostitutes were given a place of honor. The state only became involved in sexual matters when someone's choices threatened the status quo. There were four central choices/acts concerning sexuality which, if violated or engaged in, would necessitate legal action: Sex with a woman who had chosen a life of chastity, incest, kidnapping, and rape.

“Other than infractions regarding these social mores and taboos, Roman citizens were free to engage in any kind of sexual activity they desired. Problems between partners were their own responsibility to resolve.

“Husbands frequently visited prostitutes in brothels or encountered them at parties or festivals. Prostitution, male and female, was not only legal but considered as natural an aspect of society as employing people to sweep the streets and clean out the latrines. Prostitutes were, naturally, considered low-class individuals, but so were dancers, actors, gladiators, and singers. Respectable social status was reserved for those who fit neatly into the paradigm of the social hierarchy, and those people were always married.

“There was no marriage ceremony as recognized in the modern day. Marriage was only legal between two consenting Roman citizens, but “consent” was probably not always given freely. If a father had arranged a marriage for his son or daughter, unless he was very lenient, the child was expected to go through with it even if they would prefer not to.

“The minimum legal age for a girl to be married was 12 and, for a boy, 15 but most men married later, around the age of 26. This was because males were thought to be mentally unbalanced between the ages of 15-25, ruled entirely by their passions and unable to make sound judgments. Girls were thought to be far more mature at an earlier age (an accepted fact in the modern day) and so were ready for the responsibilities of marriage when they were, often considerably, younger than the groom.

“Marriage was, technically at least, monogamous but divorce was acceptable, no stigma was attached to it, and remarriage was not only equally acceptable but expected.

“Although the Roman patriarchy controlled how marriage was defined and observed, and men were expected to have extramarital dalliances, there was still room for honest, loving relationships between husbands and wives based on mutual trust and affection. Women may not have had the kind of equality they were entitled to, but many were still able to live satisfying, contented lives and, often, in the comfort of their husband's love, respect, and admiration.”

This eye-opening peek into the sex and marriage customs of first century Rome gives us some background to understand the challenges God and the saints faced with the revelation 1 Corinthians 7. Two more points. Some Jews and Greeks in Corinth also had more than one wife, like Old Testament times. Some also had concubines - like a second-tier wife, part of the family and sexually available. Got it? Head hurt? OK, here we go!

1 Cor. 7:1

Now concerning the things about which you wrote: it is good for a man not to touch a woman.

Some of the Corinthian saints had written to Paul wanting clarification on proper Christian sexual thought and conduct. When you consider their past convoluted experiences, it’s understandable. The first thing Paul says is that it’s not good for a man to touch a woman. This “touching” is in the context of sexual relations, not common physical contact. Usually, men get sexually stimulated by sight and women by touch. Paul is saying that it is good for a man not to touch a woman to stimulate her if he has no intention of marrying her. The question then becomes, “How does marriage fit with this advice?”

1 Cor 7:2

But, because there is so much sexual immorality, let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband.

Here’s God’s remedy for the situation of “so much sexual immorality” in Corinth. It’s this new technology called … marriage! It started … in the garden! It’s as old as humanity itself. Perhaps, if it was good for the original models, it will be good 4000 years later, right? The only problem is … there have been some alternatives springing up since. “Like what?” you ask. Like multiple wives, concubines, prostitutes, homosexuality, and sex slaves. Other than that, it was just like the garden, right?! Sheesh! What a mess! God/Paul will begin to unravel some of the mangled knot to which sexuality had gotten tangled since the garden.

This verse is completely revolutionary at that time – one man + one woman. The first point we get from that is that homosexuality is off the table. It’s wrong. It’s sin. And all the rainbow flags in the world won’t change this verse. If homosexuality was permitted by God (and it was much more permitted then than it is in our culture now) then the verse would read “let each person have their own mate”. Why does it read “let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband”? Because that’s what God inspired Paul to say and write. This is the will of God. Period. This should be obvious and uncontroversial with just a cursory knowledge of human anatomy, but “the lobby for gay is strong in this world”, as Yoda would say. Even if the push for “gay rights” is as strong as “flat earth rights” were before Colombus, it won’t change reality. This doesn’t mean that we treat homosexuals any different from any other person with a problem. God loves everybody. (Thank God, because we all have problems.) He, of course, doesn’t love what everybody does, and He’s been clear on that morally and practically since the beginning. Remember His initial command to the original humans?

Gen. 1:26a

And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and subdue it.

Homosexuals can’t do that. No fruit – no multiplying. The gay lobby says, “God made us this way!” No, recent studies reveal that childhood trauma and bad parenting practices made you that way. Now, despite whatever lousy situations we find ourselves, God loves us and can help any of us break out of whatever bondage we find ourselves in. And when Christ returns, we get new bodies - with all sin, addictions, mutations, and spiritual strongholds eradicated. Praise God!

The second point is so revolutionary that it somehow escapes notice from most modern eyes. Women are treated equally to men! This is the first time after Eden! Why equality?

Gal. 3:27,28

For as many of you as were baptized into union with Christ have put on Christ.

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you all are one in Christ Jesus.

The spirit of God is the great equalizer. Men may be physically bigger and stronger than women on average, but God’s spirit can compensate for any disadvantage in size, ethnicity, class or gender. Even though the Roman culture dictated that men had all the advantages and choices, God doesn’t agree. He treats both genders equally.

Now, this third point was probably a tough pill to swallow for the men. They were used to being able to “touch” a slave whenever they wanted. They could visit a prostitute when it suited them. They could pick up an extra handmaiden as a concubine if they wanted and even get a second wife. If they were saved, this revelation declared that all those options ended. It was the wife only. Period. What a radical change sexually and to your self-esteem. All your neighbors and friends had sex all the time. By the way, in Corinth a man wouldn’t be considered committing adultery with any of the partners listed above. He would only be adulterous if he had relations with another citizen’s wife. In contrast, a wife would be considered adulterous if she had sex with anyone besides her husband. The customs and laws favored men almost exclusively. God favors no one - but loves everyone!

Here's the fourth point – and it’s a surprising doozy. At that time women died in childbirth regularly. Because of this, the average female lifespan was 25-32 years. Also, keep in mind there was no birth control like we have today. So many times, wives preferred their husbands having sex with partners other than themselves to keep from getting pregnant after they had the children they wanted. “Not tonight, dear. I have a headache. Go see the slave girl, or visit Aphrodite, or the concubine…” Verse two says, “No more immoral sexual options beside the wife.” Perhaps this is why verse 3 says…

1 Cor. 7:3,4

Let the husband fulfill his obligation to the wife, and likewise also the wife to the 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.

In a Christiam marriage, if their only option for intimacy is each other, then they must take care of each other sexually. When single, we have authority over our bodies, but when we open the door for sexuality in Christian marriage, we lack fulfillment and spark frustration without our spouse. Perhaps this is why we read…

1 Cor. 7:5

Do not deprive one another unless it is by mutual consent for a set time, so that you have leisure time for prayer and then come together again, so that the Adversary does not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.

Once married, the spouse can deprive the other of sex. The way it’s worded assumes that the sex is “due”. If not given, the spouse is “deprived”. This “deprivation” should only be done for temporary periods of spiritual activity by mutual consent with the expected result that intimacy will resume. If not, then the slave girls, etc., start looking good again to the husband and the hunky gardener starts looking good to the wife. Soon, we’re back to Gentile craziness, jealousy, lust, and strife. Christian marriage is so much better.

Let me point out something else. God only gives the Christian married couple one sexual ground rule – one man + one woman. He’s clear on who, then after that, the what, why, when, where, and how of fulfillment are up to them. The only guideline is “mutual consent” which also implies “mutual respect”. In that framework, each couple makes their own rules for fulfillment. God said in Genesis that He made everything “very good”. Sex is one of those good things that God made for humanity’s enrichment and fruitfulness.

1 Cor. 7:6

Now I say this by way of concession, not by God’s command,

for I would like everyone to be just as I myself. But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another.

Paul is saying that he is not commanding spouses to separate from each other for prayer, but concedes that they might want to do that. His preference was for each believer to be single, like him, so they would avoid all the entanglements of married life. But some come genetically from the factory (so to speak) burning hot sexually and socially, and some come “less hot” and can control their sex and companionship urges and be single.

1 Cor. 7:8,9

Now I say to the unmarried and to the widows, it is good for them if they remain single, just as I am.

But if they are not exercising self-control, let them marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with desire.

Some “burn hot” and lose self-control, turning to prostitutes or whoever’s available. What a mess! God says, “Get married! Avoid desperate, frantic and stupid thinking! God will keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on Me, not on that stuff!”

1 Cor. 7:10,11

Now to the married I command, not I, but the Lord, that the wife not depart from her husband

(but should she depart, let her remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband not leave his wife.

Some are confused by the phrase “I command, not I, but the Lord”. As said previously, most of the New Testament was still unwritten at 50AD when Paul wrote this. He quoted what Jesus said when he taught on marriage, 20 years before. Now Paul adds additional revelation regarding how new creation marriages should work. The Lord Jesus’ command was for married people to stay married or if they leave, stay single. The point is don’t jump from one tough situation to another which only might seem better. ‘Divorce regret’ can be a real bummer. Many find they bring their biggest problem – their attitude and habits – to the next marriage, poisoning it like the one before. Work it out. Jesus’ love, mercy and grace model the right attitude and actions for success. Christ is in us. We must live like it.

1 Cor. 7: 12-16

But to the rest I say (I, not the Lord), if any brother has an unbelieving wife, and she is content to live with him, let him not leave her.

And the woman that has an unbelieving husband, and he is content to live with her, let her not leave her husband.

For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of the brother. Otherwise, your children would be unclean, but now they are holy.

Yet if the unbelieving departs, let him depart, the brother or the sister is not bound in such cases, but God has called us in peace.

For how do you know, O wife, if you will save your husband? Or how do you know, O husband, if you will save your wife?

God wants peace, not disruption and chaos. Because most marriages were arranged, people had little choice about whom they married. Also, with people marrying so young, it was common for people to convert to Christianity while married. This probably led to more conversions but also “mixed marriages”. God promised blessing on the unbelieving spouse and children of these marriages, perhaps in testimony to the sanctity of “one flesh”. Still, if the unbelieving spouse wants out of the relationship, the believing spouse should let them go and not feel in bondage to the mixed marriage. They are free to marry again - but this time with a believer. Jesus’ command to stay single after divorce is superseded in a new creation, mixed marriage! Who knew? No one, that’s why it was called the sacred secret!

1 Cor. 7:17-24

Only as the Lord has assigned to each one, as God has called each, so let him walk. Indeed, this is my rule in all the churches.

Was any man called being circumcised? Let him not become uncircumcised. Has any been called in uncircumcision? Let him not be circumcised.

Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but the keeping of the commandments of God is everything.

Each one should remain in that calling in which he was called.

Were you called while a slave? Do not be concerned about it. But if you are able also to become free, rather do that.

For whoever is in union with the Lord, who was called while a slave, is the Lord’s freedman. Likewise whoever was called while free is Christ’s slave.

You were bought with a price. Do not become slaves of other people.

Brothers and sisters, each person is to remain with God in whatever condition he was called.

If God calls you while married, stay married. If he calls you when single, stay single… (unless you’re ‘burning’ - verse 9, then get married.)

1 Cor. 7:25-28

Now concerning virgins, I have no commandment of the Lord, but I give my judgment as one who has received mercy from the Lord to be trustworthy.

I consider, therefore, that this is good because of the present distress; that it is good for a man to remain as he is.

Paul saw the urgency of the times amidst the spiritual battle. Unmarried saints could have more undiluted focus on spreading the gospel. He saw that as a priority.

1 Cor. 7:27

Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be loosed. Are you loosed from a wife? Do not seek a wife.

But if you marry, you have not sinned, and if a virgin marry, she has not sinned. Yet those who do marry will have trouble in the flesh, and I am trying to spare you.

Paul gives us his best advice, then handles the “fall back” provision. God does this many times because of our weaknesses and His overwhelming love. For example, I used to have a GPS – global positioning satellite tool. It looked like this:



When I followed the highlighted route, I went directly to the destination. When I veered off the suggested route, the machine “recalculated” how to get me from where I wandered off back to the destination. It took me longer to get there and cost more gas, but I still arrived at the destination **IF** I followed the GPS.

This is what God did for the Corinthian saints and does for us every day. He told them “Stay single and you’ll avoid trouble in the flesh. The word for “trouble” is translated “pressure” elsewhere. A single person gets up in the morning and eats when and what they want, wears what they want, goes where they want, with who they want, when they want. A married person - not so much! Being married adds pressure. Now, being single and burning with sexual desire and loneliness is also pressure, therefore each of us must pick our pressure and life. And God always helps with our decisions and the “Recalculating…”!

1 Cor, 7:29-31

But this I say, brothers, the appointed time has grown short, so from now on those who have wives should be as if they had none;

and those crying as not crying; and those rejoicing as not rejoicing; and those who buy things, as if they did not have them;

and those who use the world, as not using it to the full, for the present form of this world is passing away.

Paul mentions the urgency of the times. He saw it would take an “all hands on deck” effort for the church to survive the tough times ahead. What things? Probably fierce persecution.

1 Cor. 7:32-35

I want you to be free from anxieties. He who is unmarried is anxious about the things of the Lord, how he can please the Lord,

but he who is married is anxious about the things of the world, how he can please his wife,

and is divided. So also, the woman who is unmarried and the virgin are anxious for the things of the Lord, so that she can be holy both in body and in spirit, but she who is married is anxious about the things of the world, how she can please her husband.

And this I say for your own profit, not to impose a restraint on you, but to promote that which is proper, and so you can be devoted to the Lord without distraction.

Single and married people have different priorities and corresponding anxiety levels as was stated before. Single people can do more for the Lord. Which situation is better? Everyone gets to honestly figure that out between them and God. There is no “right or wrong” answer – only your answer. God wants your benefit with no “restraint” or bondage. We get to pick the life we want and then live it – with God’s help.

1 Cor. 7:36-38

But if any man thinks that he is acting improperly toward his virgin daughter, if she is past the bloom of her youth, and if need so requires, let him do what he will; he does not sin; let her marry.

But he who stands steadfast in his heart (being under no obligation, but has control over his own will) and has decided in his heart to keep his own virgin daughter will do well.

So then both he who gives his own virgin daughter in marriage does well; and he who does not give her in marriage will do better.

This is probably in response to another question sent by letter mentioned in the first verse. Once again, God advises the believing fathers not to marry off their daughters unless they feel it’s right. But if they do, it’s OK. Do you see the pattern? With free will God gives us lots of latitude in choices. With each choice there are benefits and costs. He informs us of both in our choices as we walk with Him. Then it’s up to us to choose and then He walks with us as we journey down that path. By the way, if you’re thinking of arranging a marriage for your daughter today, good luck!

1 Cor. 7:39-40

A wife is bound for as long a time as her husband is living, but if the husband has fallen asleep, she is free to be married to whom she wants, but only if he is in the Lord.

But, in my opinion, she is more blessed if she remain as she is, and I think that I also have the spirit of God.

Lastly Paul answers the question of widowhood – what should she do? By now the answer and logic are obvious. Better to stay single but it’s OK to remarry if you’re burning with desire or loneliness - just make sure it’s with a believer! Then Paul says that this opinion is brought to you by our sponsor – God and His spirit. It’s one of the clearest statements of divine inspiration in scripture. Aren’t you glad we serve a living lord who gives us guidance and despite our occasional disregard for that guidance at times, is always…

