

A COMMENTARY ON THE APOSTLE PAUL'S FIRST LETTER TO THE CORINTHIANS

According to the Homilies of St. John Chrysostom and other Fathers of the Church

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Chapter Seven

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Marriage or Celibacy?

BACKGROUND: Some of the questions the Corinthian Christians posed in their letter to Paul dealt with the proper Christian attitude toward sexuality and marriage.

7:1. Now concerning the things of which you wrote me: It is good for a man not to touch a woman. Paul's advice is that virginity and celibacy are preferable for Christians, if these states allow a life that is more fully dedicated to Christ in a particular ministry.

If you abstain from marriage that you may have leisure for the service of God and yet do not so employ that leisure, it is of no advantage to you. CHRYSOSTOM¹

7:2. Nevertheless, because of sexual immorality, let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband.

7:7-9. For I wish that all men were even as I myself. But each one has his own gift from God, one in this manner and another in that. But I say to the unmarried and to the widows: It is good for them if they remain even as I am; but if they cannot exercise self-control, let them marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion. Both celibacy, for the purpose of dedicating oneself more fully to Christ, and marriage are holy states—each given to some.

Marital sexuality has been elevated to a Sacrament and it must be treated as a precious, beautiful and holy gift that God gives as a reward to two heterosexual beings who place themselves under God's law in order to procreate and continue God's creativity.²

Through the Sacrament of marriage, God invites man to cooperate with Him in creating new human life (Gen 1:27-28, 2:21-24, Mt 19:4-6), one aspect of man having been created in the image of God. Angels do not procreate. Animals procreate without responsibility and without, for the most part, the creation of a family unit.

Other purposes of marriage are to "provide physical and moral assistance to two individuals who have placed themselves willingly under the same yoke,"³ and to provide for fulfillment of sexual desire for those not given the gift of celibacy, in order to prevent the sin of fornication (1 Cor 6:9).

7:3-4. Let the husband render to his wife the affection due her, and likewise also the wife to her husband. The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. And likewise the husband does not have authority over his body, but the wife does. A man and woman united in marriage become one body, *one flesh* (Gen 2:24), a fact which is clearly symbolized by the sexual union but applicable to all aspects of human life. In a good marriage, that which one partner lacks is provided by the other. They become whole in a way not possible for either alone. When one feels fear, the other provides hope; when one is short on patience, the other ameliorates with love; where one is weak, the other tries to be strong. Through this union, one is not master of the other, they become servants to each other. Each should concern himself with the happiness of his partner. The husband's body belongs to his wife, so he cannot offer it to another. Likewise, the wife's body is not her own, but her husband's. Notice the equality of the sexes in these verses, unusual for the time in which this Epistle was written.

7:5-6. Do not deprive one another except with consent for a time, that you may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again so that Satan does not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. But I say this as a concession, not as a commandment. A husband and wife may agree at certain times to abstain from sexual activities in order to give themselves more fully to prayer, fasting, meditation and almsgiving for the purpose of spiritual growth in the image of Christ. Though one can and should pray at all times as Paul taught (1 Thess 5:17), a couple that is growing together spiritually can find such a time of more intense spiritual focus very rewarding. This type of mutual spiritual discipline encourages a deeper marital intimacy and is appropriate before receiving Holy Communion and during the Lenten periods prescribed by the Church.⁴

Concurrence in this matter, however, is not always possible. If one partner desires abstinence for a time but the other does not, the non-concurring partner may become angry and quarrelsome or restless, and in the extreme, could become involved in adultery. If this were to happen, any potential spiritual advancement on the part of the individual who desires to abstain would be negated by the unrest caused by and to the unwilling party. The non-concurring partner should sincerely try to understand the spiritual concerns of his/her mate, and the partner desiring a time of abstinence should try to understand the physical and emotional needs of the other, always for the purpose of strengthening their union and their mutual commitment to Christ. It is incumbent upon the individual more understanding of God's ways to have more patience in this and every area of the human struggle for spiritual growth.

7:10-11. Now to the married I command, yet not I but the Lord: A wife is not to depart from her husband. But even if she does depart, let her remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband. And a husband is not to divorce his wife. Whether to marry or not is a matter of personal choice; but once married, divorce is not allowed for Christians, in keeping with the teachings of our Lord (Mk 10:11-12, Lk 16:18). Jesus said that the one exception to this rule is in the case of unchastity on the part of one of the partners (Mt 5:32, 19:9).

Accordingly, "the Orthodox Church opposes the dissolution of marriage except for the cause of fornication, because one of the two partners has become one flesh with another individual."⁵ However, in the role of a wise, caring, loving mother, the Church, in order to prevent further sin, "has modified her teachings and divorce is granted today on several other grounds such as desertion, extreme cruelty and incompatibility, inability on the part of either partner to consummate the physical union, or incurable mental illness."⁶ This is a serious step with far-reaching effects, and should be taken only after the parish priest, the Bishop and his Diocesan spiritual court have attempted to assist in the reconciliation of the couple. These situations are private matters between the parties involved and their Father Confessor, and are separate from civil procedures.

After such an unavoidable divorce, neither spouse, if they are able, should remarry, but should with fervor, dedicate themselves to Christ or work to reconcile differences, if possible, in order to reunite. The Church, however, again to avoid further sin, allows remarriage in the Lord (in the Church), within its guidelines. The original Greek word used in Scripture in place of the word "divorce" is actually closer in meaning to the term "separation." Separation also more appropriately describes the Church's dissolution of a marriage. The ties that bind can be loosed but are never completely eliminated—consequences linger.

The Church's reluctant but realistic conclusion that some marriages should be dissolved is in keeping with the fullness of God's revelation. Scripture continually gives glimpses of the ideal—the goal to strive for. Always, however, we are reminded of the love of Christ and the fact that He accepts us as we are as

long as we keep trying to do our best to follow His example (like a good parent who wants his children to live up to their potential for their own good, but loves them no matter what).

...the Lord showed that certain precepts were enacted for (the Jews) by Moses, on account of their hardness (of heart), and because of their unwillingness to be obedient, when, on their saying to Him, *Why then did Moses command to give a certificate of divorce, and to put [a wife] away?* He said to them, *Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so.* (Mt 19:7-8); thus exonerating Moses as a faithful servant, but acknowledging one God, who from the beginning made male and female, and reproving them as hard-hearted and disobedient. And therefore it was that they received from Moses this law of divorcement, adapted to their hard nature. But why do I say these things concerning the Old Testament: For in the New also are the Apostles found doing this very thing, on the ground which has been mentioned, Paul plainly declaring, *I, not the Lord, say* (1 Cor 7:12). And again: *But this I say as a concession, not as a commandment* (1 Cor 7:6). And again: *Now, concerning virgins: I have no commandment from the Lord, yet I give judgment, as one whom the Lord in His mercy has made trustworthy* (1 Cor 7:25). But further, in another place he says: *so that Satan does not tempt you because of your lack of self-control* (1 Cor 7:5). **...the apostles are found granting certain precepts in consideration of human infirmity, because of the incontinence of some, lest such persons, having grown obdurate and despairing altogether of their salvation, should become apostates from God.**

IRENÆUS⁷

When we find ourselves at the point where we really understand how far short we fall from Christ's perfection, we begin to understand the message of salvation: that we are saved not through merit (by our works) but by faith (through His grace). Our works, however, the fact that we sincerely and doggedly keep trying to grow in holiness) are necessary to demonstrate and strengthen our faith. This is also the way God's work is accomplished. Some may progress in this more than others because each person enters the struggle with different talents, handicaps and opportunities. The gap between Christ's perfection (the legalistic requirement for salvation) which is our goal (Mt 5:48), and the degree of holiness each of us attains with the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit is filled by God's grace.

Our involvement, then, in the spiritual life should not be half-hearted, while relying on the thinking that because God is loving, everyone will get into Heaven. Rather, each of us must struggle as if trying to win the most important race of our lives (see 1 Cor 9:24). But there is no need to despair. God's grace will bring us over the finish line if a review of our life shows we really tried. Of this we can be confident!

7:12-13. *But to the rest I, not the Lord, say: If any brother has a wife who does not believe, and she is willing to live with him, let him not divorce her. And a woman who has a husband who does not believe, if he is willing to live with her, let her not divorce him.* In the era in which Paul wrote, Christianity was brand new. Everyone who came to it was a convert. Often one partner in a marriage would convert and the other would not. The unbelieving partner might be Jew or pagan. The question here was, should the Christian partner continue in the marriage with the non-Christian partner? Paul's opinion is that the Christian partner should not be the one to call an end to the marriage.

7:14,16. *For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband; otherwise your children would be unclean, but now they are holy. 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?* Divine blessings, to a certain extent, extend to a Christian's family and sphere of life (see Gen 17:7, 26:3-5, 39:5), the hope always being to eventually bring spouse, children and other relatives and friends within the fold of believers.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT: (a). Do Paul's instructions that the "unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife" and vice versa (7:14, 16) apply to any situation common in our times?

7:15. *But if the unbeliever departs, let him depart; a brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases. But God has called us to peace.* If the unbelieving partner insists on divorce, the Christian partner should grant it, rather than reject Christ in order to follow one's spouse or live in a home of constant turmoil. Note the use of the terms *brother* and *sister* to denote fellow Christians.

7:17-24. *But as God has distributed to each one, as the Lord has called each one, so let him walk. And so I ordain in all churches. Was anyone called while circumcised? Let him not become uncircumcised. Was anyone called while uncircumcised? Let him not be circumcised. Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing, but keeping the commandments of God is what matters. Let each one remain in the same calling in which he was called. Were you called while a slave? Do not be concerned about it; but if you can be made free, rather use it. For he who is called in the Lord while a slave is the Lord's freedman. Likewise he who is called while free is Christ's slave. You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men. Brethren, let each one remain with God in that calling in which he was called.* A person need not alter his/her status or condition of life in order to be a Christian, only follow Christ within those circumstances. Like flowers, we are expected to bloom where we are planted.

Circumcision and slavery were issues during the time in which Paul wrote. Circumcision was the symbol or seal of inclusion under the Written Covenant of the Old Testament (Rom 4:11). Circumcision was superseded by Baptism as the symbol of faith under the new and final Blood Covenant through Jesus Christ, so whether or not one was circumcised no longer mattered.

The condition of slavery would not preclude one's becoming a Christian. If freedom from slavery could be gained—great! If not, this fact was no impediment—it too could provide opportunities for witness. A Christian belongs to Christ, and can and must serve Him no matter what the outward circumstances of life. One can obey an earthly master as long as s/he does not in so doing disobey God. To allow an earthly master to induce us to disobey God would make us *slaves of men*, but we are called to be *slaves of Christ*.

We were *bought* with the *price* of Christ's precious blood. All who believe that His sacrifice atoned for sin will share in the reward He earned: eternal life with God in His Kingdom. We are *slaves of Christ* to the extent that our obedience is demanded in order to prove our faith. Each of us though is a *freedman*, in that we are no longer under obligation to actually be perfect according to the Mosaic Law in order to earn salvation. We have the freedom to operate within the limitations of our individual abilities and opportunities, as long as we continually and whole-heartedly strive toward Christ's perfection.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT: (b). Slaves had to obey their earthly masters. They could find themselves in situations where they were forced to choose to either disobey God or to die, as when they were told to publicly denounce Christ. In our modern world, in what spiritual dangers do we find ourselves where we might have to choose between being *slaves of men* and *slaves of Christ*?

7:25-38. *Now concerning virgins: I have no commandment from the Lord; yet I give judgment as one whom the Lord in His mercy has made trustworthy. I suppose therefore that this is good because of the present distress—that it is good for a man to remain as he is: Are you bound to a*

wife? Do not seek to be loosed. Are you loosed from a wife? Do not seek a wife. But even if you do marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned. Nevertheless such will have trouble in the flesh, but I would spare you. But this I say, brethren, the time is short, so that from now on even those who have wives should be as though they had none, those who weep as though they did not weep, those who rejoice as though they did not rejoice, those who buy as though they did not possess, and those who use this world as not misusing it. For the form of this world is passing away. But I want you to be without care. He who is unmarried cares for the things that belong to the Lord—how he may please the Lord. But he who is married cares about the things of the world—how he may please his wife. There is a difference between a wife and a virgin. The unmarried woman cares about the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and spirit. But she who is married cares about the things of the world—how she may please her husband. And this I say for your own profit, not that I may put a leash on you but for what is proper, and that you may serve the Lord without distraction. But if any man thinks he is behaving improperly toward his virgin, if she is past the flower of her youth, and thus it must be, let him do what he wishes; he does not sin; let them marry. Nevertheless he who stands steadfast in his heart, having no necessity, but has power over his own will, and has so determined in his heart that he will keep his virgin, does well. So then he who gives her in marriage does well, but he who does not give her in marriage does better. In view of the difficulties of the Christian life, the amount of work to be done to teach the Gospel fully, and the shortness of time remaining because of the limits of life and the Second Coming of Christ, which each generation of Christians has thought was imminent,⁸ Paul's opinion is that married or unmarried, Christians should focus on serving Christ:

—if married: remain married and serve the Lord together.

—if single: do not seek a spouse because being unmarried allows a closer walk with Christ, with fewer worldly distractions. If unable to remain celibate and chaste for that purpose, then marry.

—if engaged: if breaking one's promise to one's betrothed would cause lasting distress, then marry—it is no sin.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT: (c). What is the message in this for our time?

7:39-40. *A wife is bound to her husband as long as her husband lives; but if her husband dies, she is at liberty to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord. But she is happier if she remains as she is, according to my judgment—and I think I also have the Spirit of God.* One who marries is bound to his/her spouse as long as the partner lives. If one partner dies, the remaining partner is allowed to remarry (in the Church), but in Paul's opinion should remain unmarried in order to more fully serve the Lord, with fewer divided loyalties. *In the Lord* refers to the fact that a Christian must not marry a non-Christian and points to the sacramental nature of marriage from the beginning of the Church.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT COMMENTS

(a). Do Paul's instructions that the "unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife" and vice versa (7:14, 16) apply to any situation common in our times? Partners in marriage often are not at the same spiritual level. One may come to an awakening apart from the other—or to a deeper commitment to Christ than the other. It is incumbent upon the one more spiritually mature to try to bring the other along, for if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever (1Tim 5:8).

(b). Slaves had to obey their earthly masters. They could find themselves in situations where they were being forced either to disobey God or to die, as when they were told to publicly denounce Christ. In our modern world, in what spiritual dangers do we find ourselves where we might have to choose between being *slaves of men and slaves of Christ*? In our modern society, we are sometimes almost slaves to our employers. We may also find ourselves in the position of being slaves to society and its norms and fads. Christians should obey their employers as long as doing so does not diminish or contradict their following of Christ. The same holds true in following social dictates. The first commandment (Ex 20:3) prescribes that God must come first, and all must be brought under subjection to Him, not vice-verse.

(c). As in the ancient Church, the Christian life is still difficult, there is still a lot of work to be done, and the time that remains to us is short. What does this mean with regard to our commitment to Christ? Each of must assess our lives to determine how, given our own individual gifts, strengths, abilities, opportunities and circumstances of life, we can best serve the Lord. This is a question to be addressed continually when considering the direction our lives should take from any point.

¹ Schaff, "Homily XIV on Timothy," Vol. XIII, p.454.

² Demetrios J. Constantelos, *Marriage, Sexuality & Celibacy*, p.22-4.

³ *ibid.*

⁴ George Nicozisin, "Abstinence in Sex Relations," *Your Marriage in the Orthodox Church*, p.44.

⁵ Constantelos, p.62. See also: Mastrantonis, "Reasons for Divorce," p.141.

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ Roberts & Donaldson, "Against Heresies: Book IV," p.480.

⁸ God wants His people to always live in a state of readiness, so does not make known the time of Christ's Second Coming. This is so because that knowledge (or knowing the time of one's own death) could cause one to think, if that time seemed far in the future, that there was no immediate necessity to take part in the spiritual struggle because he had plenty of time "for that." This, of course, could lead one too far astray to ever return to the fold—precisely what Satan hopes for.