

Are Celibacy and Marriage Spiritual Gifts? A Series on Spiritual Gifts: Part 3

There is considerable debate whether Paul speaks of celibacy and marriage as spiritual gifts (1 Cor 7:7). Most traditional lists of spiritual gifts do not include 1 Corinthians 7:7. At the heart of the interpretive question is whether Paul uses the Greek noun “charisma” in 1 Corinthians 7:7 in the same manner as he does in other references to spiritual gifts (Rom 12:6; 1 Cor 12:4, 9, 28).

Yet I wish that all men were even as I myself am. However, each man has his own gift (**charisma**) from God, one in this manner, and another in that. (1 Cor 7:7)

In comparison to 1 Corinthians 7:7, Paul speaks of spiritual gifts (Rom 12:6-8; 1 Cor 12:8-10, 28) with several distinctive differences:

1) Spiritual gifts are spoken of in the context of the Holy Spirit.

For I long to see you so that I may impart some spiritual gift (**pneumatikos charisma**) to you, that you may be established; (Rom 1:11)

Now there are varieties of gifts (**charisma**), but the same Spirit (**pneuma**). (1 Cor 12:4)

1 Corinthians 7:7 mentions the gift as coming from God but not as a gift of the Spirit; the Greek term “pneuma” is absent.

2) When Paul speaks of spiritual gifts, he places an emphasis on their purpose, the importance of their diversity and why.

The type of spiritual gift one receives is dependent on the measure of one’s faith for the purpose of serving the church body and exercised accordingly (Rom 12:3-6; Eph 4:7; 1 Pet 4:10-11).

1 Corinthians 7:7 does not mention the gifts for the purpose of serving the church; instead, Paul mentions one purpose of marriage as avoiding the temptation of immoral sexual behavior. It’s difficult to understand how one’s marital status, celibate or married, serves the church.

3) Paul lists spiritual gifts as a specific type of service (i.e. prophesy) or within the context of a person (i.e. prophet).

1 Corinthians 7:7 does not mention a specific gift; instead, the gift is mentioned as “one in this manner, and another in that.”

If Paul speaks of celibacy and marriage as grace gifts but not in the context as spiritual gifts, what then is he talking about? Speaking about the same topic, Jesus implies something similar:

And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.” The disciples said to Him, “If the relationship of the man with his wife is like this, it is better not to marry.” But He said to them, “Not all men can accept this statement, but only those to whom it has been given. For there are eunuchs who were born that way from their mother’s womb; and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men; and there are also eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. He who is able to accept this, let him accept it.” (Matt 19:9-12)

Here Jesus says that most will prefer to marry and that a minority, Jesus implies, will choose to be single and virgin “for the sake of the kingdom.”

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Paul's discussion on celibacy and marriage cannot be understood apart from his preface on Christian morality and sexual matters (1 Cor 6:12-20). The challenge facing a Christian in Corinth arises from the distinctive social influences of Corinthian society and unique culture.

Controlling the access to two seas, the Aegean and Ionian, Corinth was strategically important for both commerce and military position. During the Roman period, Corinth became the capital of the Roman province of Achaia establishing it as a political and trade center. With its prosperity, the temple of Aphrodite atop the monolithic rock overseeing Corinth flourished with its 1,000 (and more) female cultic priestess prostitutes attracting people from around the world. When evening came, the priestesses would descend to Corinth to solicit for their "goddess of love."

Despite its wealth and luxury, Corinth became known for its immorality.

The Greek expression "korinthiazomai," was used by ancient writers to describe a morally loose person and meant "to live like a Corinthian in the practice of sexual immorality."

With the Mosaic Law, God forbade premarital or extramarital sex (Deut 22:13-29); but by the first century, the Jews no longer strictly enforced its penalty. Roman law permitted prostitution but forbade premarital or extramarital sex only if both parties were of aristocratic birth. Greek philosophers believed that sex without marriage was permissible as long as they were in complete control of their emotions. In the Greek mind, the body was done with at death.

Against this background, some Corinthian Christians felt that it was permissible to do anything with their body; physical activity such as eating, and by extension sex, did not have any bearing on Christian morals or spiritual life (1 Cor 5:1-2).

Paul sought to address this logic with a contrast: "all things are lawful to me, **but** not all things are profitable." (1 Cor 6:12)

To the Greeks, Paul uses their analogy, "food is for the stomach and the stomach is for food," to affirm the temporal nature of food, the stomach, and promiscuous sex, but denies their worthless view of the human body. God values the human body so much that He paid a price so that it could be resurrected (which the Greeks deny). (1 Cor 6:13-14)

Though prostitution was a disreputable profession for women, it was not regarded as such for its male patrons. Paul makes the point that when one cohabits with a prostitute, it is not simply a physical act. It also affects the spirit of those involved; the spirit of prostitutes and the Spirit of God are mutually exclusive (1 Cor 6:16-17). Though not with prostitutes, Solomon provides an illustration of how promiscuity can affect one's spirit. Despite his gift of wisdom (1 Kings 3:5-10), Solomon had 700 wives, princesses and 300 concubines who influenced him to worship other gods and committed detestable acts instead of exclusively worshipping Yahweh (1 Kings 11:4-8).

Amidst this culture, Paul provides the Corinthian Christians the biblical view of their bodies (1 Cor 6:19-20):

1. As mentioned earlier to the Corinthians (1 Cor 3:16), each Believer, his whole person, is the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells within him (1 Cor 6:19).
2. Because he was purchased for a price (alluding to slavery and redeemed), a Christian has no right to pervert and misuse his body, because God is his master (1 Cor 6:20). The idea of being "bought" in reference to redemption from slavery is repeated in 1 Corinthians 7:23.

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3. Paul's conclusion is that a Christian is to glorify God in his body (1 Cor 6:20).

After challenging the perverse logic of immorality and establishing the sanctity of the human body, Paul begins his response to two questions the Corinthians raised: 1) should a Christian get married (1 Cor 7:1) and 2) should virgins get married (1 Cor 7:25)?

These questions apparently reflected the conflicts created by prevailing opinions of the time:

Jewish teachers considered celibacy sinful, because marriage was mandated (Gen 2:22-24) for the purpose of reproduction (Gen 1:28). Marriage was also a deterrent from sexual offenses and temptation (Prov 5:19-20).

Greek philosophers and some religious sects such as Essenes (among the Jews) advocated celibacy in dedication to spiritual pursuits. Some Greek philosophers believed that sex with prostitutes was fine, because it did not burden one with marriage.

Jesus spoke of celibate men who were "eunuchs who were born that way from their mother's womb; and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men; and there are also eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. He who is able to accept this, let him accept it." (Matt 19:9-12)

To the question "should a Christian get married?" The answer is yes, and it is in the context of the sex worshipping culture of Corinth that Paul responds, "But because of immoralities, each man is to have his own wife, and each woman is to have her own husband." (1 Cor 7:2)

Recognizing the temptation of passion and the risk it poses to self control, Paul emphasizes that sex should take place within the sanctity of marriage (1 Cor 7:9).

While it may appear that Paul portrays marriage as the response to sexual temptation, his real concern is for Christians succumbing to the sexual temptations of Corinthian culture. Elsewhere Paul teaches the beauty of marriage and the commitment of two people just like the example set by Jesus Christ's commitment to the church (Eph 5:22-33) (see the article: What Atonement means to Husbands at www.Helpmewithbiblestudy.org/10ChristianLiving/MarriageWhatAtonementMeansToHusbands_Mar.aspx). Thus Paul is not saying that marriage is all about sex.

To the question "should a virgin get married?" Paul's answer is, "I have no command of the Lord,.." (1 Cor 7:25)

A person's marital state is a matter of personal choice. Either choice is acceptable and not a sin (1 Cor 7:28).

In Paul's opinion (1 Cor 7:25) it is better to be celibate so that one could be free of any concern of the world and be fully devoted to God (1 Cor 7:32-35). Paul sees the celibate as making the choice to be, in essence, married and joined to the Lord,

Paul's celibacy is not a singleness determined by circumstance (i.e. physical condition, not found a spouse or choice of others like divorce, etc) or requires a suppression of sexual desire; it is a choice and commitment that Believer makes to God just as man and woman make a commitment in marriage.

This idea of celibacy in total devotion to God will be experienced by all genuine Believers when the Resurrection occurs (Mark 12:25; Rev 19:7-10).

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While Paul shares the benefits of celibacy in the context of one's relationship with God, his main point to virgins is to regard their body as the temple of God and not sin by sexually joining themselves to anyone besides their spouse.

While answering the Corinthians' questions of whether a Christian or virgin be married give the appearance that the topic is about sex, Paul's real intent is holiness regardless of one's marital state including those who are single but not celibate (1 Cor 7:9), divorced (1 Cor 7:10-11), or Believers married to non-Believers (1 Cor 7:12-16).

The "charisma" of 1 Corinthians 7:7 is neither specific nor restricted to those married or celibate. Paul's "one in this manner, and the other in that" is directed towards a broader audience of marital and single situations.

Regardless of the marital state one is in, the circumstance is by grace; however, be holy.

Regardless of the circumstance one is in, serve God in the manner that he has been called and live for His glory (1 Cor 7:17).

Arising from salvation and the legal acquittal of sin, Paul sees the Christian life, from beginning to end, as one of grace (1 Cor 6:1-18; Rom 5:2; John 1:16).

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