



# The Ten Commandments

## (35) The Seventh Commandment

### (2) Singleness

Exodus 20:14

Isaiah 62:1-5

1 Corinthians 7:1-8

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This is the second sermon on the Seventh Commandment. The Seventh Commandment is “You shall not commit adultery.” As we have been seeing with all the commandments, they are about much more than what is explicitly commanded or forbidden. They are all about all of life from the perspective of the principle reflected in each particular command. And so the Seventh Commandment is about all of life from the perspective of the fact that we are created as sexual beings.

Also each of the commandments is both about what we are not to do and what we are to do. This is the distinction between sins of omission and sins of commission. The Christian life is not only about not doing certain things, it is also about doing the right things. So the Sixth Command is about not taking life or endangering life, or disrespecting life and it is about preserving life and nurturing life and promoting life. The Seventh Commandment is about forbidding any sinful expression of our sexuality and it is about positively expressing our sexuality according to God’s purpose for it.

But this raises an important question. How does the positive side of the Seventh Commandment apply to people who are not married? The negative side is clear enough from the Bible. Single people are not allowed to engage in sexual activity. Celibacy. Abstinence. Those are the words that sum up the relationship of single people to sexual activity – at least in its narrow sense. But what about the positive side of the

command. What are single people to do with their sexuality? Part of the answer to that is purity. But is that all that is to be said? I want to explore this question with you this evening.

Now there are a few comments that I want to make as we get into this subject. The first is that I'm speaking about more than a few people in our congregation. Everyone who is not married is single and that is somewhere about half of the congregation. Quite a few of the single people in our congregation are very little people and for them what we will be thinking about this evening is not yet on their radar. But there are also quite a large number of unmarried people that we tend to refer to as young people as opposed to children and for them the words abstinence and purity are significant words. So there are a lot of people in the single category.

The second thing I want to say by way of preface is that as a preacher there is a certain awkwardness in speaking about things that are easy for me to say, but hard for certain people to live with. One of them is suffering. So far the suffering in my life has been relatively minor and I sometimes have to speak about suffering from a biblical perspective to people who are dealing with really hard things in their lives. Another example of this sort of thing is the gender roles issue of headship and submission. I'm a man and I have to tell women to submit to their husbands and that they cannot be office bearers in the church. There is a certain awkwardness about that.

And the subject of singleness is another that fits into this category. I have to say that singleness is a gift of God while I enjoy the gift of being married. And those of you who are single and wish you were married, can say, "That is easy for you to say." And that is true. It is easy for a married man to say that singleness is a gift and for some of you, at least, singleness it is a gift you would rather not have. You would rather have my gift than your gift. All I can say is that both you and I have to live with what the Bible says, and I have been called to preach what the Bible says and to some extent I understand it when you think to yourself – "That is easy for you to say."

One other thing that I can say about that is that God has richly blessed the church with people who have greatly suffered who have wrote

about suffering and the church is blessed with women who have written about male headship and submission in marriage and church and the church is blessed with single people who have written about singleness. Such people are truly gifts to the church and give us insights into the connection between biblical truth and life that can only come from experience. And I have read some of what Christian singles have written to help me prepare for this sermon.

Now as a whole, the Bible is pretty positive about singleness and we are going to explore that both later on in this sermon and in other sermons. And as far as I can tell, it does not have a lot to say about the difficulty of being single. Unless I am missing some important passages there is not much emphasis in the Bible about the difficulty of being single.

That is not to say that for some people it is not difficult. Some people wish they were married and find being single to be difficult. That is understandable. When we are young most of us hope to be married someday and once we get a little older and it has not happened yet, we are disappointed and hope that it will still happen. But the Bible does not have much to say about that problem directly. And the New Testament especially is really quite positive about the life of singleness. But one thing that the Bible does address is the difficulty of abstinence for most people who are not married and who submit to the biblical teaching about sexuality.

1 Corinthians 7 addresses this issue. Paul has most to say in the Bible about being single and he encouraged people to be single. In 1 Corinthians 7:1-2 he writes, "Now concerning the matters about which you wrote, 'It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.' But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband." And in then verses 8-9, he continues, "To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single, as I am. But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion."

Now most of us read these words with understanding sometime after puberty and we know that we are tempted to sexual immorality and we place ourselves firmly in the category of those who will need to be

married according to what Paul says in these verses. I do not know what everyone else's experience is like, but it is quite obvious that most people have a pretty strong sex drive and that controlling it is a rather great challenge and one that is not always won. And so we quickly place ourselves in the need-to-get-married line.

But Paul's words are rather difficult to swallow for those who place themselves in the "need-to-get-married" line, but the right person does not come along. That becomes a rather big problem. I need to get married according to the biblical description of people who need to be married, but in the providence of God marriage is not happening.

Now one thing that can be said about this is that those who place themselves in the need-to-get-married category should take reasonable steps to make finding a marriage partner more likely, but even that does not always have the desired results.

So there are people who are not married, who, 1 Corinthians 7 seems to say, should get married, but marriage is not a gift that God has given them yet. Instead God has given them the gift of singleness. For most people abstinence is hard.

There is a very touching article on The Gospel Coalition website called "Sex and the Single Woman" by Fabienne Harford. It is as relevant to men as it is to women and I highly recommend it. But please do not just google "Sex and the Single Woman." That will bring up stuff that will not help you. Instead first go to the US edition of The Gospel Coalition website and then put the title "Sex and the Single Woman" in the search field of the website. This will be the first article to come up.

Anyway I mention this article because this woman, Fabienne Harford, expresses so eloquently her struggle with her sexual desires. She was converted from the world and had come to understand that God's place for sex is only within marriage. She embraced God's plan and submitted to it as a single woman. But she is open about the difficulty. She writes, "[I]t turns out believing that sexual fulfillment is designed for marriage doesn't make you any less of a sexual being. Understanding and even loving God's view of sex doesn't make you want it less. Singleness presents a series of hardships, but for me learning to live without

physical intimacy has provided the biggest challenge and deepest suffering of this season.”

Now I don't know if everyone's experience is like hers, but I suspect that is for many. Having sexual desires and not being married is difficult for many if not most. Of course for the world this is not a problem, because the world rejects God's requirement of abstinence for all unmarried people and these days we must add God requires abstinence for all people who are not married according to the biblical definition of marriage which is the union of one man and one woman. But if you accept the biblical teaching and you are not married it is likely that this is a problem for you.

Now what are we to make of Paul's instructions in 1 Corinthians 7 that if you cannot exercise self-control you should get married. For many people that works out - although there is always a period of time between realizing that you are in the need-to-get-married camp and actually getting married. And for some the issue is, "I feel that I am in the need-to-get-married camp but finding someone to get married to is easier said than done." What are we to make of Paul's instruction here for those in that situation?

I want to begin to answer this question with a quote from a recent book by a Christian single man named Sam Allberry called *7 Myths about Singleness*. I think we should all read this book whether we are single or married. It is a wonderful sensitive, insightful, gospel-saturated treatment of this subject. Anyway, in that book he discusses the issue of Paul's teaching that those who cannot exercise self-control should get married. This is some of what he says about this passage.

“What Paul says here is not the only thing he has to say about marriage. He's not pretending to provide here an exhaustive list of all that needs to be considered when choosing whether or whom to marry. His point is much more specific: if all other things are equal, then an overwhelming desire for sexual intimacy may be a reason to think about choosing to marry.”

“And this needs to be considered alongside the other things Scripture says about how we go about finding an appropriate marriage partner.

Not everyone struggling to exercise self-control in this area will necessarily be able to find someone appropriate to marry. The presence of significant sexual desires does not justify disobeying other biblical commands about, say, not marrying someone of the same sex or someone who does not share our faith in Christ. We can't just take 1 Corinthians 7:9 on its own and deduce from it that God now somehow owes us some form of sexual intimacy. Paul's point is that those who can marry appropriately are free to and, if their sexual desires risk distracting them from a wholehearted focus on the Lord, are encouraged to." (Loc. 513)

So when you factor in everything else that the Bible says about marriage and life with God, it is clear that Paul is not saying that every single person who struggles with abstinence should get married. He is not saying that all people who have trouble with self-control should get married and that the only people who should stay single are those who do not struggle with self-control.

The bottom line here is that if you struggle with self-control and you are given an opportunity to get married in a way that is consistent with faithfulness to all of what the Bible teaches about marriage – go for it. But he is not saying that every person who struggles with self-control should immediately get married. In broad-terms one of the biblical reasons for marriage is help keep people from immorality. But that does not mean that there are not other options. There are people that in the providence of God do not find a marriage partner and while they may struggle with self-control there is grace in the gospel to learn self-control and to forgive when the self is not controlled.

So on the one hand God says in 1 Corinthians 7:2, "But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband." But he also says through Paul in 1 Corinthians 10:13, "No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you to be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it." He also says in 2 Corinthians 12:9 "My strength is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

The gift of singleness is not the gift of the removal of sexual desire. Nor is it, the taking away the desire to be married. That is what we might think at first when we read what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 7:7, “I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another.” That gift is not the gift of making singleness easy. If that were the case then most single Christians do not have the gift of singleness. The biblical idea of gift that applies here is the idea of an ability for service to the church and kingdom. Both marriage and singleness are gifts in that sense because they both are avenues for service to God. Marriage is a gift to be used in the service of God. So is singleness.

Now Paul in the latter part of 1 Corinthians 7 gets into the whole matter of how singles are spared many of the problems and distractions of marriage and so they have opportunities to serve God in ways that married people do not have. I’m not going to get into that now, because I want to stick with the overall subject of this sermon and that is the meaning of their sexuality for singles. I do want to address more aspects of singleness next week.

And I am only going to deal with one part of that subject. Sexuality understood more broadly refers to gender as well as sexual desire and singles experience and live their lives as either males or females and that maleness and femaleness is a significant for the meaning of their lives and how they experience life and serve God. But what I want to focus on specifically in this sermon is the significance for singles of the fact that God has made them sexual beings – that is people with the equipment for sexual activity and the physical and psychological desires that are part of that. That it seems to me is a very significant question for our understanding of singleness from a biblical perspective.

If you are not married, does that mean that your sexuality more narrowly understood is without significance and purpose? Is that whole part of your being superfluous? Is the only meaning of your sexual nature and the desires that go with that only that you are to not indulge them? The answer to this question is rooted in the God’s deepest purpose for sex and sexuality and that is the fact that it points to our relationship with God. In the Old Testament God uses marriage to

describe the relationship between himself and his people and in the New Testament the same imagery is used to point to the relationship between Christ and his church.

And marriage and sex belong together. Marriage is more than sex, but sex is a constituent part of it and so one of the key purposes of sex is to point beyond itself to the love, intimacy and satisfaction of the relationship between God and his people, Christ and his church. And so one of the purposes of sex in marriage is to teach us that sex and marriage are not enough to satisfy the deepest desires and needs of the human heart. Marriage and sex rightly experienced provide one of the greatest experiences of love, intimacy and satisfaction that we can know in this life. But one of the fundamental truths of the Bible is that nothing in this life can completely fulfill and satisfy us. Another way of putting this truth is that only God can truly satisfy the human heart. And any life that is not satisfied in God is ultimately empty and unsatisfying.

The only way that the things of earth can truly satisfy us is if they point us to God and satisfaction in him. And one of the points of all the pleasures and satisfactions in life is that they are not enough. We cannot be complete without God. Our hearts cannot rest apart from God. And so marriage and sex make the point that they are not enough. They can never be what God must be in our lives. And so if they are experienced the way that God intends for us to experience them, we will not be fully satisfied in them and the experience of them will make us long for the ultimate satisfaction of our souls and that is intimacy and satisfaction in God.

That is why I read Isaiah 62:1-4 as our Scripture reading. Hear again the last part of verse 5, “[A]s the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.” This is the meaning of marriage and sex within marriage – the intimacy that is conveyed by those words, “[A]s the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.” Jesus refers to this same truth using other imagery in John 4:13 in his encounter with the woman at the well, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”

So the meaning of sex in marriage is that sex is not enough. It can be a wonderful experience of intimacy and love, but like all the blessings of this life it is meant to point us to its fulfillment in our relationship with God. And to have marriage and sex, but not God is to live an impoverished life.

And it is in the light of this that we can understand the meaning sexual desires for singles who remain celibate. Having sexual desires and not giving into them means that you have what your sexuality points to in your relationship with God. If sex in marriage means that sex is not enough, living with unfulfilled longings as a single person makes the point that what they point towards is enough for a full and satisfying life. The ultimate satisfaction that we need for a fulfilled life is not sexual satisfaction, but intimacy with God.

Both in marriage and in the celibate life for God's people, the meaning of our sexuality is what it points towards and that is the delights and satisfactions of loving God and being loved by him. "[A]s the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you."

Here is how Sam Allberry expresses this point. "Our marriages are ... temporal and momentary. They are not eternal. The state in which we will spend countless billions of years in ultimate bliss will not be as people married to one another. Outside of our relationship with Christ, we will be single.... Singleness for us now is also a way of being witness to this reality. Like Jesus, we can live in a way that anticipates what is to come. Singleness now is a way of saying that this future reality is so certain and so good that we can embrace it now. It is a way of declaring to a world obsessed with sexual and romantic intimacy that these things are not ultimate and that in Christ we possess what is." (Loc. 1579)

Now this is all wonderful and real and meaningful and enriching, but we hear these words as sinners who fail both in marriage and as singles. It is one thing to say these things. It is another to experience them. In whatever state we are in we look too much to the things of earth to satisfy us apart from God and we are not nearly enough focused on being satisfied in all the different ways that God is the ultimate satisfaction of our hearts.

And we must consider all of these things in the light of the gospel. We all sin in various ways through improper use of our sexuality whether in marriage or outside of marriage. What I have been describing is as much a goal as it is a reality. If we are God's people we will have some delight in our relationship with God, but there will also be too much preoccupation with earthly things and there will always be failure in connection with the godly use of our sexuality.

So we need to be reminded of the gospel. We can take no comfort from the gospel if we are living in sexual sin, but we certainly can if we are struggling with sexual sin – that is if we are living the life of confession, repentance and trusting in Jesus. The passage in Isaiah 62 that we read was first addressed to Israel. And one of the themes of Israel's history is spiritual adultery. The theme of God's marriage to Israel is dominated by Israel's unfaithfulness. It is a sad history. But we can identify with it. And when God says, "[A]s the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you," - those tender words are fulfilled in the marriage of Christ and his church. Jesus is the bridegroom. And this tenderness is expressed in and through his work of salvation. We are unfaithful in many ways. But we can know the intimacy with Jesus because his love is a love that saves and heals and cleanses. Paul makes that explicit in his key passage on Christ and the church – Ephesians 5:25-27, <sup>25</sup>... Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, <sup>26</sup>that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, <sup>27</sup>so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish."

Whether we are single or whether we are married, there will be some form of sexual sin. If it depended on our faithfulness and purity, there would be no hope and none of the truths that we have considered would be very helpful or comforting. But we can rejoice in what we experience of them and be determined that by the cleansing power of Christ that we will grow in prioritizing intimacy with our Bridegroom over all else. And so we can experience a growing harmony between our sexuality and our relationship with God.