

“Keeping your First Marriage First”
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I. Disclaimer

- a. Tim Keller says that when one preaches they should not shake more snakes out of the bush than they can kill. Wednesday night it became apparent that many snakes ‘got away’. Rather than publishing the message on the internet and ‘hatching’ some more, it was prudent that I clarify what WAS and what WASN’T being said about marriage at theStudy. This is everything I INTENDED to say the other night and more!

II. First Marriage First

- a. Paul’s premise at the end of 1 Corinthians 6 is that the ‘be all, end all’ of our existence is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.
 - i. *NIV 1 Corinthians 6:19b-20 You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body.*
- b. He appeals to the ‘purchase’ that God has made of mankind in Christ and cites that as the driving motivation for ‘honoring God’ with our bodies.
- c. It is vital to note that this comes on the heels of Paul’s delineation of major obstacles that the Corinthian church faced to ‘honoring God’ with their bodies, namely sexual immorality.
 - i. *NIV 1 Corinthians 6:16 Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body? For it is said, "The two will become one flesh." 17 But he who unites himself with the Lord is one with him in spirit. 18 Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body. 19a Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?*
- d. Paul chastises the church for finding their ‘identity’ in their union with prostitutes rather than in their union with Christ.
- e. Application is clear for us: Our first marriage (the one of the Christian to Christ) is to be kept first in life.

III. Second marriage for the sake of the first

- a. Follow the logic for a moment.
 - i. Christians struggling sexually
 - ii. Exhortation to honor God with their bodies
 - iii. Deep desire for sex, what’s a person to do?
 1. Paul’s answer is: “Get married”
- b. Before you tune out, simply consider the text. Three times Paul will address the sexual struggle and then apply the marital solution
 - i. *NIV 1 Corinthians 7:1 “Now for the matters you wrote about: It is good for a man not to marry. 2 **But since there is so much immorality, each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband.**”*
 1. Notice what he says- SINCE there is so much immorality- then each man should have his own wife.
 - ii. NOTE: The following quotes from John Calvin come from his commentary on 1 Corinthians. Parenthetical statements are my own.

iii. John Calvin on this text:

1. *But to avoid fornication.* He now commands, that those who are liable to the vice of incontinency should have recourse to the remedy. (If you wrestle with sexual immorality then you should have access to the recourse of sexual *morality*) For though it may seem that the statement is universal, it ought, nevertheless, to be restricted to those who feel themselves urged by necessity. (Calvin is making the point that marriage is not commanded everyone, but only to those who are ‘urged by necessity’) As to this, every one must judge for himself. (You’ve got to decide if that is you) Whatever difficulty, therefore, is perceived to be in marriage, let all that cannot resist the promptings of their flesh, know that this commandment has been enjoined upon them by the Lord. (Whatever difficulties may come in marriage, know this, marriage is the only outlet for the ‘promptings of the flesh’)

iv. I Corinthians 7:5 “Do not deprive each other except by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.”

1. He states it again: Because of the lack of self-control and the wiles of the devil- come together again.

v. This is where Calvin is perhaps the strongest in urging marriage.

1. We give Satan an occasion for oppressing us, when we attempt anything beyond the measure of our weakness! (Notice the argument. He says that we are GIVING Satan an occasion for ‘oppressing’ us when we attempt ANYTHING beyond the measure of our weakness. In essence, asking for temptation if we try to ‘just stop’ rather than ‘getting a ring!’) “But we must resist Satan.” What if arms and shield be wanting? “They must be sought from the Lord,” say they. But in vain shall we beseech the Lord to assist us in a rash attempt. (He is addressing the pious who say, “Shouldn’t we pray more? Shouldn’t we read the Bible more?” Calvin answers, “Okay you want to resist more, but with what? You have tried that! *What if ‘shield’ and ‘sword’ are missing?*” The ‘pious’ then say, “We must put on the Lord’s armor!” Calvin responds, “We IN VAIN ask God to assist us in such a rash attempt! Pay attention because He is about to say that the ‘sword’ and ‘shield’ for this battle is a ring and bed!) We must, therefore, carefully observe the clause *for your incontinency*: for we are exposed to Satan’s temptations in consequence of the infirmity of our flesh. (The reason, he says that we are exposed to the temptations is because we are sinners!) If we wish to shut them out, and keep them back, it becomes us to oppose them by the remedy, with which the Lord has furnished us. Those, therefore, act a rash part, who give up the use of the marriage bed. (If we want to ‘shut out’ and ‘keep back’ the temptations of the flesh it is incumbent upon us to ‘oppose’ them by the remedy ‘which the Lord has furnished us’ i.e. marriage. The weight of that last statement cannot

be overstated. Calvin is saying that the act of ‘rashness’ is NOT getting married. He is saying that the ‘rash’ action is to ‘give up’ the use of the marriage bed and NOT get married.)

- vi. I Corinthians 7:8 “Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I am. 9 But **if they cannot control themselves, they should marry**, for it is **better to marry than to burn with passion.**”
 - 1. Notice finally: If they cannot control- they SHOULD marry
 - 2. It is BETTER to marry- than to burn with passion
 - vii. Calvin again: “*But if they cannot contain.* While he advises to abstain from marriage, he always speaks conditionally-*if it can be done, if there is ability*; but where the infirmity of the flesh does not allow of that liberty, he expressly enjoins marriage as a thing that is not in the least doubtful. (Calvin is saying that where the desire is unquenched then there is no doubt what must be done. Marriage is incumbent upon those who do not have the liberty of remaining unmarried.) For this is said *by way of commandment*, that no one may look upon it as mere advice. (There are no other options) Nor is it merely fornicators that he restrains, but those also who are defiled in the sight of God by inward lust; and assuredly he that *cannot contain* tempts God, if he neglects the remedy of marriage. This matter requires not advice, but strict prohibition.” (It is a difficult word that Calvin speaks to us: We are tempting God IF WE NEGLECT the remedy of marriage.)
- c. Paul’s pastoral concern for Corinthians and for us is this: the Church is neglecting their first marriage with Christ by indulging in sexual immorality. That issue, by design, can only be addressed/assuaged by a second marriage- the one of a husband to a wife
- 1. NOTE: I am going to address some practical ‘what do I do right now if I don’t have a girlfriend/boyfriend who is a suitable candidate for matrimony?’ issues at the end of this.
 - ii. It must be noted that Paul’s goal is NOT to get everyone in the sack or to the altar. These verses are replete with Paul’s esteem of the ‘gift’ of singleness over and above marriage. The reason for that is quite simple: Paul’s **goal** has *nothing* to do with sex or marriage. It is inherently tied to the ‘first marriage’ idea. The ‘main thing’ is honoring God in our lives.
 - 1. If sex/sexual immorality is not a struggle- you may have the gift of singleness and can ‘freely’ honor God with your body.
 - 2. But, if sex/sexual immorality is a struggle then Paul’s answer, the Bible’s answer, Calvin’s answer and my answer to you IS marriage. It is incumbent upon you to apply the Biblical antidote to those desires and that antidote IS marriage.
 - 3. There is but one motivation for this, NOT to have intercourse legally, but rather to be ‘freed’ from the tyranny of sexual immorality IN ORDER TO serve the true and living God more fully with a clear conscience and to honor Him with your body by having sex within marriage.

- d. There is a sense in which our ‘second marriage’ then becomes a catalyst and a motivator toward our ‘first marriage’.
 - i. We understand this experientially. We know how the guilt and shame of sexual immorality ‘keeps us from’ the gospel and ‘keeps us’ from the Father. When sex and sexuality are brought in to the realm of marriage our consciences are ‘free’ from that struggle and consequently ‘free’ to approach the Father.
 - ii. Our ‘second marriage’ propels us toward our ‘first’

IV. Do I have the ‘gift’?

- a. Paul’s references to the ‘gift’ of singleness have caused no small amount of consternation among Christian singles.
- b. There is no ‘gift’ from God that people fear more.
- c. By way of pastoral application let me suggest several principles to you.
 - 1. The ‘gift’ was one that Paul reveled in, not feared
 - 2. The ‘gift’ cannot be decided by others for you neither can it be imposed upon you
 - 3. The ‘gift’ was clearly not given to all men
 - 4. The ‘gift’ was something that could be seasonal
 - a. What I mean is this: a widow could have experienced a ‘season’ of life after the death of her husband where the desire for intimacy was minimized, but then later rekindled. Paul says that she would then be ‘free to marry.’
 - 5. The ‘gift’ was something that Paul saw as a motivation for ministry and a ‘freeing’ thing, rather than a hindrance to life.
 - 6. For those with the ‘gift’ normal sexual temptation was something that could be conquered via the means of grace (prayer, Scripture, church). It was not that sex was never ‘thought about’ but that sexual temptation never ‘controlled’ them. Calvin will say that these individuals feel the ‘heat’ of sexual temptation, but never ‘burn’ with desire.
- d. If you are ‘wrestling’ with this idea. I would suggest for further reading Paige Benton’s essay, “Singled out for Good” available at www.ruf.org. Paige, by the way, just got engaged at 33
- e. Discerning whether or not you have the ‘gift’ would be a topic outside the pale of this outline. You should seek wise and Godly counsel before making such a determination about your life. It is my contention, however, that this gift is rarely given.

V. Practical Implications/Objections answered

- a. What do I do now? (I’m presupposing you do not have the ‘gift’)
 - i. Answer to that question has several caveats but I would break that into 3 categorical answers and say: Pray, Be Patient & Pursue.
 - 1. Pray.
 - a. This is for both men and women. Pray for wisdom, grace and providence. God is sovereign. While there is no ‘one person’ that we MUST FIND or be faced with a life of ‘second best’

we do believe in providence and that the person we ‘choose’ *is* that person whom God has chosen for us. Pray for wisdom to choose well. Pray that God would show you whether or not your ‘criteria’ for choosing are legitimate. Pray about your understanding of marriage and the gospel that you might fully know what you are getting in to. Pray that you would keep your ‘first’ marriage FIRST.

2. Be Patient.

- a. Waiting on God can be a frustrating, sobering and sanctifying thing. Remember the events of this life unfold on His timetable not on our own. Hold your own agenda loosely. Hold your own timetable for that agenda even looser. Be aware and beware that your tendency will be to be just ‘patient enough’ so that you can run in the throne room of heaven and say, “See! I’ve been patient....NOW give me what I want!”

3. Pursue.

- a. If you are dating someone who is a VIABLE candidate* for marriage and you find yourself struggling sexually you should put marriage on the ‘fast track’. You know how many times ya’ll have promised to not do ‘that’ again or to ‘never’ cross that line only to find yourself ashamed and laden with guilt. Calvin says that you are using the wrong shield. What you need is a ring and a minister. Get married. Period.
 - i. *What do I mean by VIABLE candidate? I am suggesting that if you are dating someone who is emotionally, physically and spiritually compatible with you then that person is ‘viable’ as a candidate for marriage. If they meet the non-negotiables as well as some of your negotiables then they are viable. Pulse and heartbeat does not equal viable. NOTE: if they aren’t emotionally, physically and spiritually compatible DO NOT get married BREAK UP NOW and spend the next 6 months NOT on the re-bound spend the next 6 months figuring out how and why you were in that relationship in the first place.

4. “I’m not dating anyone right now.”

- a. Pursue marriage. This will mean different things for men and women. Men, let me say this: It is time to cowboy up! This isn’t 6th grade dance. Her friends aren’t going to tell you she likes you first. Find a woman who you could die for, notice her character, consider her life and then tell her your intentions. (Note: do not be “dysfunctional dan” who does this on the first casual date at Baskin Robbins. “Hey do you want mint chocolate chip or for me to speak to your father about making a lifelong covenant with you?” Rule of thumb: you must clearly state your intentions BEFORE she becomes emotionally exposed or at risk, okay?)

- b. Ladies, there is a 2 sided coin for you. First of all, if you don't want to be pursued by him you need to learn one 2 letter word: NO. It is that simple. Would you like to get dippin' dots? No. Sure? No. How 'bout next week? No. See how easy? On the flip side Ladies, your roommate can read your non-verbals, he cannot. If you want to have dippin dots a second time, say "Yes". He won't be able to read your mind. Don't make him ask your roommate if you had a good time. Tell him!
 - c. Secondly, pursue your first marriage. God created you to respond, not to lead. Respond to the Father who has drawn near to you. Let the Gospel transform you from the over-anxious, over-needy person that you can sometimes be to a woman of gentle confidence. Nothing is more attractive than a woman who is confident in Christ and doesn't 'need' a boyfriend. Pursue Christ and let Him bring the man who will pursue you.
- b. I was asked this question the other night, "Is 'sex' the only reason to get married?"
- i. Calvin again: "But it is asked-" Is this the only reason for entering into matrimony, that we may cure incontineny?" I answer, that this is not Paul's meaning; for as for those that have the gift of abstinence from marriage, he leaves *them* at liberty, *while he commands others to provide against their infirmity by marrying*. The sum is this-that the question is not as to the reasons for which marriage has been instituted, but as to the persons for whom it is necessary. For if we look to the first institution, it could not be a remedy for a disease which had ^as yet no existence, but was appointed for begetting offspring; but after the fall, this second purpose was added."
1. Calvin is less clear than I'd like at this point, but in essence he's saying that the 'cure' for 'incontineny' (lust) is two fold- either the 'gift' or marriage. He makes the correct observation that marriage existed pre-fall and thus it's purpose couldn't have been merely to keep us from fornicating. He states that it was 'pre-fall' appointed for procreation but 'post-fall' this reason (cure for incontineny) has been added. I think he is over simplistic in his 'pre-fall' reasons. Additional 'pre-fall' reasons such as a completing sense of man so that man, as God's image bearer, could live in community as the trinity does could be given as well.
 2. Suffice to say that 'post-fall' the 'appeal' of marriage retains those 'pre-fall' reasons, but additionally now has the compelling sense of protecting us sexually that we have spoken of.
 - a. SIDE NOTE: I am not sure why so many singles have an aversion to saying that they 'need' to get married in order to protect themselves. We must put off the false piety that makes 'struggling in secret' better than admitting weakness and embracing God's remedy. The gospel frees us to be

‘weak’. We can come before the people of God and profess that “This is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh I cannot live without him/her. For without her or without him I would perpetually struggle. This is now, at last, God’s precious, gracious, beautiful provision for me! Amen and amen!” Doesn’t that sound more exciting than pushing each other off of the couch for the next 3 years because we can’t ‘do that’? I’d rather have you skimp together your money get a smaller place, get married and only get off the couch to deadbolt the front door.

- c. Is marriage the only way that we can deal with sexual temptation?
 - i. Absolutely, unequivocally “NO”. But, is marriage God’s intended, permanent provision for the desires that live within us? Absolutely, unequivocally “YES”. There are times and seasons of struggle and temptation even after you are married that must be dealt with and addressed spiritually, but even for married couples as Paul addressed, part of the ‘spiritual prescription’ was to ‘not deny each other’ except for a season.
- d. How do I know whether I’m ‘burning’ with lust?
 - i. Calvin on the difference between ‘burning’ and ‘heat’
 - 1. “In some instances, while we are stung with the darts of the flesh, it is in such a manner that we make a stout resistance, and do not allow ourselves to be divested of the true love of chastity, but on the contrary, abhor all base and filthy affections.” (He’s saying that at times we are ‘stung’ with ‘darts’ of temptation that do not give birth to full blown immorality and cherished sinful thoughts. This Calvin would say is ‘heat’).
 - 2. “Hence all must be admonished, but *especially the young* (emphasis mine), that whenever they are assailed by their fleshly inclinations, they should place the fear of God (notice that the END of everything is that ‘first marriage’) in opposition to a temptation of this sort, cut off all inlets to unchaste thoughts (practical things like no internet, no pay-per-viw, etc.) entreat the Lord to give them strength to resist (prayer, scripture, etc.) and set themselves with all their might to extinguish the flames of lust (accountability & effort) If they succeed in this struggle (notice that Calvin says, ‘if’), let them render thanks unto the Lord, for where shall we find the man who does not experience some molestation from his flesh? But if we bridle its violence, before it has acquired the mastery, it is well. For we do not *burn*, though we should feel a disagreeable heat - not that there is nothing wrong in that feeling of heat, but acknowledging before the Lord, with humility and sighing, our weakness, we are meanwhile, nevertheless, of good courage. To sum up all, so long as we come off victorious in the conflict, through the Lord's grace, and Satan's darts do not make their way within, but are valiantly repelled by us, let us not become weary of the conflict. (All that to say this: if the means of grace are ‘working’ in your relationship and private affairs

then you are sufficiently waging war, marriage may not need be on the near horizon. But for most (I do mean most) this struggle is usually steps back and a half step forward. It is not a success if you stop at 3rd base! To those I would say again, “Get a ring!”)

- ii. Calvin again on ‘burning’:
 - 1. “Let it then be understood, that marriage is a good and salutary remedy, because *to burn* is a most base abomination in the sight of God...A temptation, then, of such a kind as hinders one from calling upon God in purity, and disturbs peace of conscience, is *burning*, such as cannot be extinguished except by marriage.”
 - 2. Calvin would say that mankind by nature all feel ‘heat’, but for most ‘where there’s smoke there’s fire’! The fire *should not* be quenched it *should be* directed toward the honorable estate of marriage.

VI. Conclusion

- a. At this point we’ve come ‘full circle’. Calvin so clearly states that the temptation that ‘hinders one from calling upon God in purity’ cannot ‘be extinguished except by marriage.’ It could not be more clear.
- b. The entire point is this: Our goal in life is the cultivation of our ‘first marriage’ the one of the Christian to Christ. The nature of sexual temptation is that it hinders most of us from that one goal. We would be wise to heed the Biblical remedy for those struggles and that remedy is, was, and always will be marriage.