

04. 1 Corinthians 7:1 – 8:6



1 Corinthians 7:1

Now concerning the matters about which you wrote:

“It is a good thing for a man not to touch a woman.”

Were some of the Corinthian community genuinely striving to imitate Paul by living celibate lives, only to be told that they were failing to fulfil their obligations? Were some of the women wanting to avoid sexual relations in their search for holiness? Were some seeking asceticism as a higher way and using it, as they were using other claims, to assert their superiority over others in the community? Were they looking upon celibacy as the easiest way to avoid sins of sexual immorality that had plagued them in the past and that continued to trouble them? Any or all of these currents of opinion may well have provided the background to the question. Paul's reply, as we shall see, is nicely nuanced.

Paul turns his attention first of all to those who are already married. His aim here is not to speak of the beauty of marriage or to depth the special graces that are given to a married couple so that their married love will be a means of mutual sanctification. Hints of his understanding and appreciation of marriage can be found in the text, but his aim is to respond carefully to the precise question that is troubling the Corinthians. One thing is clear: Paul wants to rid them of the idea that sexual abstaining is a cure-all for sexual immorality. On the contrary, the sexual drive is so strong that those who are married will find that their safest place for living chaste lives is in living their marriage well. He wants them to exercise great care about committing themselves to sexual abstention and to make sure that any decision in this direction is mutual.

1 Corinthians 7:1-6

It is a good thing for a man not to touch a woman. But because of cases of sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. Do not deprive one another except perhaps by agreement for a set time, to devote yourselves to prayer, and then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. This I say by way of concession, not of command.

Paul's sensitivity to the mutuality of husband and wife is quite outstanding. Rarely do his contemporaries consider such matters from the woman's perspective.

1 Corinthians 7:7-9

I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has a particular gift from God, one having one kind and another a different kind. To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well for them to remain unmarried as I am. But if they are not practicing self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion.

Paul's words on celibacy cause him to turn his attention for a moment to those who are in a position to follow his example: those who have never married as well as the widowers and widows. He suggests that they think seriously about celibacy, but, only if they have the gift. It is no good attempting celibacy unless they can live a sexually moral life and can mature in love as a celibate. If they do not have the gift, let them marry. Since it gives them a way of expressing their sexual needs, it is a much safer way to live chastely.

1 Corinthians 7:10-11

Paul reminds Christian couples of Jesus' teaching

To the married I give this command – not I but the Lord – that the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does separate, let her remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband should not divorce his wife.

‘Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and whoever marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery’ (Luke 16:18).

‘They are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate ...Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery’ (Mark 10:8-12).

‘Anyone who divorces his wife – I am not speaking of an illicit marriage – and marries another is guilty of adultery’ (Matthew 19:9 NJB).

1Corinthians 7:12-16

Paul turns his attention now to marriages in which one or other of the partners is not a Christian.

In Corinthian law either partner could to divorce simply by making a declaration before witnesses and registering the fact. If the Christian spouse was divorced by his or her non-Christian spouse, what was to be done? Was remarriage possible for the Christian? Alternatively, how does a person committed to the gospel live in a marriage relationship with a spouse who is not committed to it? Is the Christian obliged to divorce? Is he or she permitted to do so?

1Corinthians 7:12-16

To the rest I say — I and not the Lord — that if any believer has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. And if any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband is made holy through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy through her husband. Otherwise, your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.

But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so; in such a case the brother or sister is **not bound. It is to peace that God has called you.** Wife, for all you know, you might save your husband. Husband, for all you know, you might save your wife.

Paul does not claim to be covering every eventuality or to have the last word on such a complex matter. What was to happen when a believing spouse gave up the faith, in fact if not in theory, and made it impossible for the believing spouse to live his or her faith, or to experience peace in the marriage? Into what category would such a marriage fall? There is no substitute for doing what Paul himself does in this passage: one must examine the actual relationship in the light of the nature of Christian marriage as a sacrament of God's unfailing love, and attempt a wise, compassionate and realistic discernment, remembering, as Paul says, that **'It is to peace that God has called you'**. Fidelity to love can mean the cross – this has been a central theme of this letter. But not every cross is redemptive, nor can remaining in an unloving relationship which is destructive be described as being faithful to love.

People, with the best will in the world, make commitments which prove to be impossible to keep for any number of reasons. Where the commitment, however, is genuine, and where faith-values are shared and peace enjoyed, an arbitrary decision to renounce the commitment is a breaking of faith.

Being a disciple of Jesus does not protect a person against the ordinary situations of hurt or misunderstanding or being the victim of another person's infidelity that are part of the human condition. The fact that two disciples of Jesus pledge their love to each other in faith does not guarantee them against marriage breakdown. Love does not control, and one partner cannot prevent the sin or the infidelity or the breaking of the covenant by the other.

In Jesus' world, as in our own, it was all too easy to break the marriage covenant and to seek in another relationship the happiness one failed to find in marriage. If a marriage is destructive, this may be an appropriate response. Jesus' words, however, stand as a warning against a too easy neglect of one's obligations. Some suffering is destructive. To undergo it has no merit and no reward. Some suffering, however, is redemptive. The later is revealed by its fruit: a deepening of love.

1 Corinthians 7:17-20

However that may be, let each of you lead the life that the Lord has assigned, to which God called you. This is my rule in all the churches. Was anyone at the time of his call already circumcised? Let him not seek to remove the marks of circumcision. Was anyone at the time of his call uncircumcised? Let him not seek circumcision. Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing; but obeying the commandments of God is everything. Let each of you remain in the condition in which you were called.

The key principle in this whole matter is that the only thing that matters ultimately is God's will. If God calls us to married love, being married is the best way that we can experience communion with God and grow in intimacy with Christ. If God calls us to celibate love, then that is the way we can best live our Christian life. Each person must be attentive to and obey God's call.

1 Corinthians 7:21-24

Were you a slave when called? Do not be concerned about it. If you can gain your freedom avail yourselves of the opportunity. For whoever was called in the Lord as a slave is a freed person belonging to the Lord, just as whoever was free when called is a slave of Christ. You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of human masters. In whatever condition you were called, brothers and sisters, there remain with God.

All along he has been addressing the question of marriage or celibacy. Paul is not arguing for the keeping of the status quo. He is encouraging us to ‘**remain with God**’. If we truly want what God wants and if we listen for God’s call, we will find the right way in which to live out our Christian lives in and for the world. No structure will remain unchallenged by love.

1Corinthians 7:25-31

Now concerning virgins, I have no command of the Lord, but I give my opinion as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy. I think that, in view of the **impending crisis**, it is well for you to remain as you are. Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife. But if you marry, you do not sin, and if a virgin marries, she does not sin. Yet those who marry will experience distress in this life, and I would spare you that. I mean, brothers and sisters, **the appointed time has grown short**; from now on, let even those who have wives be as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no possessions, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. **For the present form of this world is passing away.**

1 Corinthians 7:32-35

I want you to be free from anxieties [μεριμνα]. The unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord; but the married man is anxious about the affairs of the world, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided. And the unmarried woman and the virgin are anxious about the affairs of the Lord, so that they may be holy in body and spirit; but the married woman is anxious about the affairs of the world, how to please her husband. I say this for your own benefit, not to put any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and unhindered devotion to the Lord.

In the story of Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38-42) we see two ways of attending to the Lord. Martha's problem was not that her way of serving him was in itself inferior to that of Mary. It was that in her attending to Jesus she was 'distracted' (10:40), 'anxious' [μεριμναω] and 'troubled' (10:41), whereas Mary was not.

Every moment of our life can be a prayer. No activity, no involvement, need distract us from God who is at the heart of everything, and who loves us and calls us to himself. Every occupation, and in a most wonderful way marriage and family life, can be a sacrament of love.

As, like Martha, we are busy carrying out the mission he has given us in and for the world, let us remember, like Mary, to sit at the Lord's feet and listen to him. In this way we may gradually learn, in our silence and in our activity, to give him our unhindered devotion.

1 Corinthians 7:36-40

If anyone thinks that he is not behaving properly toward his fiancée, if his passions are strong, and so it has to be, let him marry as he wishes; it is no sin. Let them marry. But if someone stands firm in his resolve, being under no necessity but having his own desire under control, and has determined in his own mind to keep her as his fiancée, he will do well. So then, he who marries his fiancée does well; and he who refrains from marriage will do better.

A wife is bound as long as her husband lives. But if the husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, only in the Lord. But in my judgment she is more blessed if she remains as she is. And I think that I too have the Spirit of God.

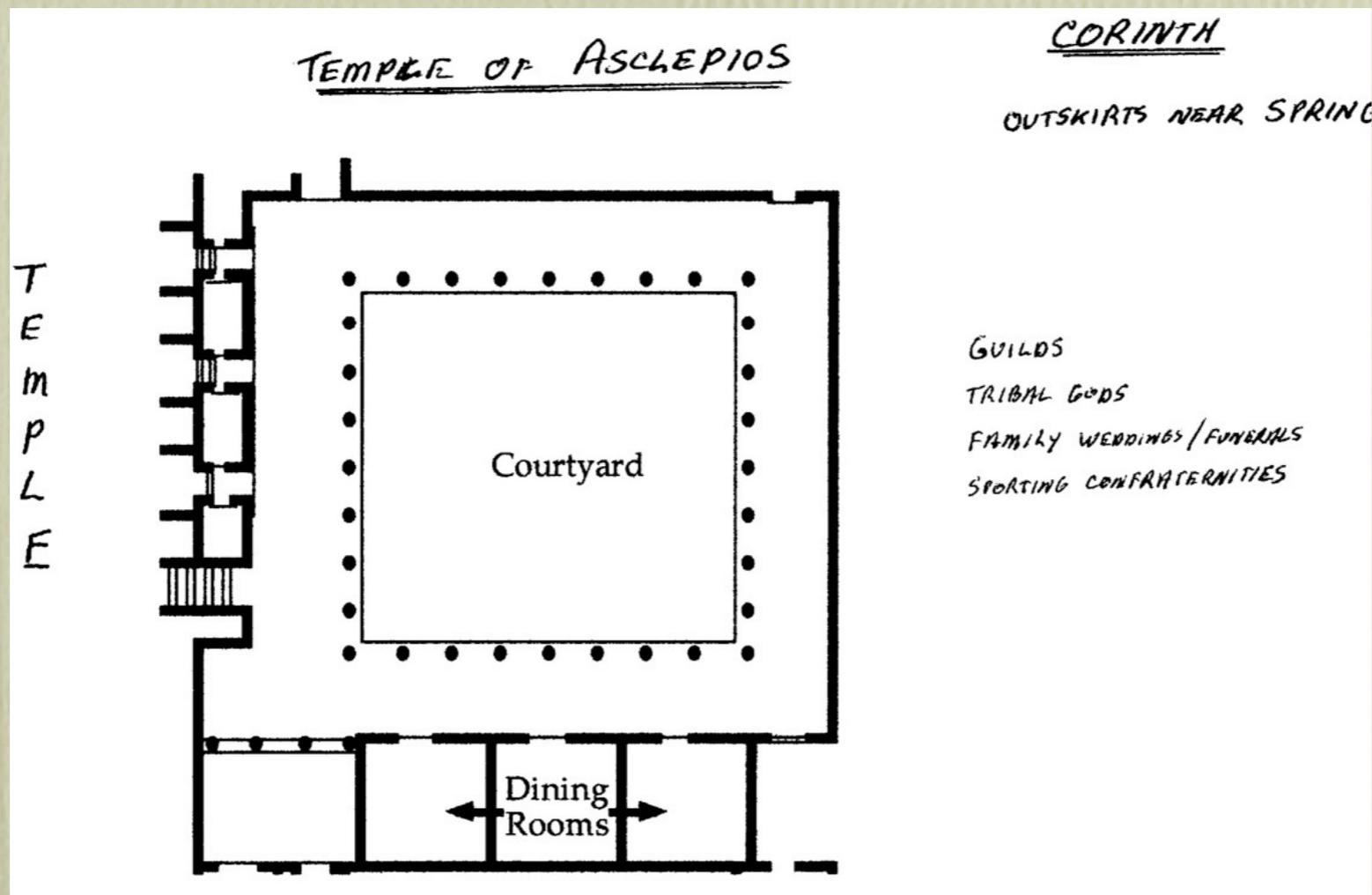
1 Corinthians 8:1

Now concerning food offered to idols

Paul turns now to the second area of concern expressed in the letter delivered to him from the Corinthian church. While, at first sight, the issue which takes up this and the following two chapters appears not to relate to our experience, a Christian community living in a largely non-Christian society faces similar problems, and Paul's magnificent reply has much to teach us about how to love others in a culturally mixed community in which there can be wide differences in the way people see things.

To grasp the issue at stake in Corinth we need to remember that sanctuaries devoted to various deities were an important part of the civic landscape. From writings of the time (including the travel guide of Pausanias, c.170AD) and from archeological discoveries, we know of the existence in Corinth of temples to Zeus, Hera, Poseidon, Asclepios, Aphrodite, Apollo, Demeter, and Persephone. Also, among others, to Octavia, the sister of Augustus, and to the Egyptian gods Isis and Serapis. Civic occasions abounded which centred on one or other of these sanctuaries. Various guilds and various tribal groups in this multi-cultural city, as well as sporting and other confraternities, gathered regularly at the sanctuary of their protective god or goddess to seek favours and to express thanks.

Then there were all the major family festivities such as marriages, funerals and births that included offerings made at a shrine. Friends were invited. Some of the offerings was later consumed by the priests; some was consumed by the guests in a room adjacent to the shrine, and the rest was sold by merchants in the public market and found its way to the tables of private homes.



One reason for the question may be what Paul wrote in an earlier letter (see 5:9-10). Surely, some of them are saying, when you told us to avoid idolaters, you were not expecting us to 'go out of the world' (5:10)?

As can be seen from the above survey, to avoid eating all meat offered to idols, they would be unable to participate in any public festivities and would have to refuse all invitations to other people's homes. Paul's response indicates that most of the community had no problem in eating such food. However, some were troubled, others were in danger of reverting to idolatry.

One can imagine how difficult the whole area was to Jewish Christians. Joining the Christian community brought them to quite a different relationship to society than that to which they were accustomed. Because of their strict Jewish teaching on matters such as the present one they could well have been especially vulnerable to scandal.

1 Corinthians 8:1-3

Now concerning food offered to idols: *We know that 'all of us possess knowledge'*. [They are quoting Paul. The implication is that it is all right to eat idol meat!]. Paul's response: **Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; but anyone who loves God is known by him.**

It seems that the Corinthians are defending their practice of eating food that has been offered to idols by claiming that all those who are doing so possess the gift of knowledge, the gift of the Spirit that enables them to know how to behave. Paul's response goes straight to the heart of the matter. Knowledge is, of course, important, but they must be careful because knowledge can be a basis for self-exaltation and pride. Knowledge, therefore, that is not suffused with love may be accurate within its limits, but it is not true, for it neglects the only ultimate truth and so everything that is known is misconstrued.

I Corinthians 8:4-6

Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, *We know that 'no idol in the world really exists', and that 'there is no God but one'*. [again quoting Paul, with the implication that it is all right to eat meat offered to idols]/

Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth — as in fact there are many gods and many lords — yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, **Jesus** the Messiah, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

It is Jesus who reveals the mystery, drawing us to ever deeper understanding of the wisdom of God. He takes us to the heart of the real, and in the mystery of his own heart he shows us the mind and will, the design and intention, of God, and the activity of God's Spirit. In coming to know Jesus we come to know ourselves and the whole of creation, for *'through him are all things and through him we exist'*.

In his person, Jesus expresses how it is that God approaches us and how it is that we respond to God. Jesus is the mediator, the peacemaker, the bridge builder. Paul wants the community at Corinth to fix their eyes on Jesus, for it is Jesus who will show them how to behave towards each other. If they think of themselves as 'strong' because they are not scrupulous over eating meat offered to idols, they must see that the only strength worthy of the name is strength in love, for the one God, the Father, is love, and the one Lord Jesus, who has called them into communion with him, is calling them to love.

Paul has gently questioned the accuracy of their claimed 'knowledge' and he has lifted the whole discussion into the context of a God who is a loving Father and of Jesus who is their way to God. He is now ready to respond to their question.



You are all I want

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