

Teaching Plan  
EXPLORE THE BIBLE

Date: March 18, 2018

Lesson Title: "Keeping Commitments"

Lesson Passage: 1 Corinthians 7:1-13

## ABOUT THIS LESSON

Paul advises that sexual relations within marriage should be characterized by mutuality, fidelity and shared Christian commitment. He advocates the permanency of marriage, recommending that believers married to unbelievers remain married, if the unbelieving partners are willing.

## TEACHING/LEARNING GOALS

(1) Use what Paul says in the lesson passage to argue against those who say "Paul was against marriage." (2) Summarize Paul's advice to Christians who are married to non-Christians.

## BEGINNING THE LESSON

*Ask class members to notice how Paul begins chapters 7,8,12 and 16 of 1 Corinthians, calling attention to the two words, "Now concerning..." Note his use of the same words in 7:25. Then explain:* In chapters 7-16 Paul is responding to questions sent to him by the Corinthians. The words "now concerning" serve as an introduction to each set of questions that he is dealing with. *Note that 1 Cor. 7:1 sets the stage for what follows, his advice concerning marriage. Add this comment:* While some people in the church at Corinth maintained a sharp distinction between "body" and "spirit" and said that what one does with the body doesn't matter, there evidently were others who believed that all "fleshly" activity should be shunned, and this included even sexual relations within marriage. Paul seems to be responding to these errors in chapter 7.

## TEACHING PROCEDURES

1. *Pose this question:* Some translations render the words in 1 Cor. 7:1b, "It is well for a man not to touch a woman," and others have, "A man does well not to marry." But, in v. 2, Paul says, "each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband." So, was Paul for or against marriage? *Pause for responses, then comment:* "To touch" is a euphemism for sexual intimacy, not marriage *per se*. However, some interpreters believe that when Paul uses the words, "It is not good for a man to touch a woman," he is quoting what the Corinthians have written to him, rather than stating his own view. These interpreters suggest this reading: "Now concerning the matters about which you wrote--for example, your notion that it is a good thing for married couples to abstain from sexual relations..." AN EXPLANATION: At the time Paul wrote this letter, laws had recently been passed under Caesar Augustus to discourage celibacy and encourage marriage, both to improve a declining birth rate and to discourage licentiousness. These laws might have been one reason the Corinthians were raising such questions at this time.

2. *Use the following outline to explore 1 Cor. 7:2-13:*

A CHRISTIAN VIEW OF MARRIAGE (7:2-5). Responding to the erroneous notion that married couples should refrain from sexual relations, Paul says that intimacy within marriage is not only permissible, it is required. *In support of this interpretation, make these points:* (1) "To have his own wife" (and "each woman her own husband") in v. 2 is a euphemism for sexual intimacy. Paul is saying, "each man should have normal sexual relations with his own wife and each woman with

her own husband." He advises this because of the temptation to immorality ("to avoid fornication," KJV). But we should not conclude that Paul thinks marriage is good for nothing except to avoid sexual temptation. He is not speaking of the purpose of marriage in v. 2; rather, he is answering the question raised in v. 1. (2) Verses 3 and 4 emphasize the *mutuality* of the marital relationship. (NOTE: The Graeco-Roman world would have agreed with the first half of the verse, "the wife does not rule over her own body," but not with the second half, "likewise the husband does not rule over his own body.") (3) Paul approves withdrawal from sexual relations within marriage (v. 5) on three conditions: *First*, by mutual consent. *Second*, to observe a season of prayer. *Third*, withdrawal from sexual activity should be for a limited time.

ADVICE TO WIDOWS AND WIDOWERS (7:6-9). (1) In v. 6, Paul distinguishes between his personal views and those that came directly from the teaching of Jesus. One translator suggests that the verse could be restructured as "I say this because God has allowed me to say it, not because he has commanded me to do so." (2) The word "unmarried" in v. 8 can mean "those who are no longer married," that is, widowers. (And this same word describes a formerly married woman as "single" in v. 11.) We may assume, therefore, that Paul is addressing these words to formerly married persons. (3) He advises widows and widowers to remain unmarried, as he is (v. 8), but only if they have the gift of celibacy. (In v. 7, Paul uses the same word for "gift," *charisma*, that he uses to describe gifts of the Spirit in 12:4. As in the case of other spiritual gifts, some believers were endowed with the ability to live the celibate life, while others did not have this ability.) (4) While he advised formerly married people to remain unmarried, he did not forbid remarriage (1 Cor. 7:39).

CONCERNING "MIXED" MARRIAGES (7:10-13). Paul advises Christians who are married to unbelievers to remain with their spouses, in the hope that their non-Christian partners will be saved. (Since vv. 12-13 refer specifically to such marriages, it is reasonable to assume that Paul has "mixed" marriages in mind in vv. 10-11).

## CLOSING THE LESSON

*Add this final thought:* Paul's advice about marriage makes it clear that marriage should be a permanent union. But he was concerned not only about the duration of marriage; in v. 15 he adds a thought about the quality of Christian marriage, "God has called us to live in peace."

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