

14.15

1 Corinthians 7:1–5—A Path to Marital Celibacy

Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: “It is well 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. (1 Cor. 7:1–5)

Typical Modern Interpretation

Most modern scholars understand the citation in the first verse (“It is well for a man not to touch a woman”) as something that the Corinthians have said to Paul. He is now responding to their claim and he issues a strong qualification that serves almost as a rebuttal.

In short, some Corinthians thought that all men (including married ones) should practice sexual abstinence. Paul thought such a practice would make them easy targets for temptation; therefore, men and women should not deprive one another of sexual gratification. Almost parenthetically, the apostle does allow that a couple might perhaps decide to forego sexual relations for “a set

time” to devote themselves to prayer—basically “fasting” from sex in a manner analogous to fasting from food.

Jerome (347–420)—First Epistle to Pammachius

The theologian responsible for translating the Latin Vulgate understood this passage differently. He took the initial sentence at face value, that is, as a statement of what Paul believed. Everything that followed was then understood as a concession by Paul, given the weakness of human flesh. And the “exception” in verse 5 should be understood as a strategy for reaching the goal expressed at the start. The ideal married couple is as chaste as virgins, with a relationship analogous to brother and sister, Jerome believed.

Thus Jerome (and thousands of priests in the centuries that followed) counseled married couples to make “abstinence from all sexual relations” their goal. The husband needs to be in charge, but he is urged to persuade his wife “by degrees” that she should covenant with him in achieving this goal. In so doing, the couple will be able to devote themselves more ardently to prayer and (drawing now on 1 Pet. 3:7) they will find that their prayers become more effective.

Going further, if sexual abstinence is what makes prayer effective, we may also reason that truly effectual prayer is impossible while cohabitation continues. And then it also might follow that the married couple that cohabitates should not participate in the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper.

Here are excerpts from Jerome's *First Epistle to Pammachius* (also known as *Epistle* or *Letter 48*):

To speak yet more plainly—if you are the “slave” of a wife, do not allow this to cause you sorrow, do not sigh over the loss of your virginity. Even if you can find pretexts for parting from her to enjoy the freedom of chastity, do not seek your own welfare at the price of another’s ruin. Keep your wife for a little, and do not try too hastily to overcome her reluctance. Wait till she follows your example. If you only have patience, your wife will some day become your sister. (48.6)¹

At the end, also, of our comparison of virgins and married women we have summed up the discussion thus: “When one thing is good and another thing is better; when that which is good has a different reward from that which is better; and when there are more rewards than one, then, obviously, there exists a diversity of gifts. The difference between marriage and virginity is as great as that between not doing evil and doing good—or, to speak more favorably still, as that between what is good and what is still better.” (48.7)²

When I do my duty as a husband, I cannot fulfil the requirements of continence. The same apostle, in another place, commands us to pray always (1 Thess. 5:17). But if we are always to pray, we must never yield to the claims of wedlock for, as often as I render what is due to my wife, I incapacitate myself for prayer. When I speak thus it is clear that I rely on the words of the apostle: “Do not deprive one another, except it be with consent

for a time, that you may give yourselves to . . . prayer” (1 Cor. 7:5) Here, the Apostle Paul tells us that when we have intercourse with our wives we cannot pray. If, then, sexual intercourse prevents what is less important— that is, prayer— how much more does it prevent what is more important— that is, the reception of the body of Christ? Peter, too, exhorts us to continence, that our “prayers be not hindered” (1 Pet. 3:7).

(48.15)³

1. P. Schaaf et al., eds., *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, 2nd series, 14 vols. (New York: Christian Literature, 1887–94), 6:48.
2. Schaaf et al., eds., *A Select Library*, 6:48.
3. Schaaf et al., eds., *A Select Library*, 6:48.