



PREPARING FOR

*Marriage*

HELP FOR  
CHRISTIAN COUPLES

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

01	Editor's Preface
04	Questions to Ask When Preparing for Marriage
09	The Surpassing Goal: Marriage Lived for the Glory of God
21	Sexual Relations in Marriage
33	Marriage, Singleness, and the Christian Virtue of Hospitality

## EDITOR'S PREFACE

Preparing well for marriage means asking each other all the hard questions.

Getting to know that special someone includes learning about family and friends and schooling and athletics, favorite pastimes, books, movies, life's best moments and worst, the brightest places in our background and the darkest.

But what about theology? Ever think to ask about that?

At *Desiring God*, one of our most accessed pages online is a set of questions John Piper put together for couples preparing for marriage (chapter 1 in this eBook). There is some of the typical stuff—like friends and entertainment and lifestyle and children—but many have found that John's way of putting the question helps get right at some pretty deep stuff.

And then there's the questions about theology, worship and devotion, and the roles of husband and wife—questions that far too many couples don't think to ask. When preparing for marriage, or even in just beginning to consider it, it is of immense help to have the perspective not only of a seasoned husband of over 40 years, but also a seasoned pastor and theologian.

This is a short eBook. Our vision for it is humble. Our hope is that a few couples, whether dating and considering marriage, or engaged and preparing for marriage, would find some benefit here, get to know each other better in some of life's most significant matters, and be more fit to discern God's leading for their lives.

We packaged three additional resources with the marriage questions hoping to enrich your preparation. Chapter 2 is perhaps John Piper's single most important message on marriage. There he goes more macro than many of us have ever dared to go in thinking about what marriage is, and what God designed it for. This is a super important chapter.

Sexual relations in marriage is the topic of chapter 3. (We know some of you may be flipping straight to that one, now that you know it's there. That's okay. Do come back to the chapters 1 and 2, when you can.) Here there is so much potential for pleasure, and so much potential for pain. Don't shy away from giving the topic of sex good consideration and honest discussion during engagement.

Finally, chapter 4 is about mission together. Marriage is for mission too. In particular, the focus here is on hospitality. It's a sermon from the series that became the book *This Momentary Marriage: A Parable of Permanence*, which is where we'd send you to learn more about marriage following this eBook. For Christians, talking about ministry together, including hospitality (literally, in the New Testament, "love for strangers") is essential preparation.

Marriage is big. What you're considering or preparing for here is no trifle. Don't think you can just add marriage as another layer to an already busy life. Marriage demands a full

restart. Reevaluate your commitments, check your priorities, rethink your normal. Hopefully this eBook and other resources like it will help. It's well worth the investment of serious questions and careful thought. For your joy, the good of others, and the glory of the church's Groom.

— *David Mathis*  
*Executive Editor*  
desiringGod.org

# 1 QUESTIONS TO ASK WHEN PREPARING FOR MARRIAGE

In each of these sections, one item could be added that I have not listed, namely, How do you handle and live with differences? How do you decide what can remain differences without jeopardizing the relationship? So as you deal with each sub-heading, include that in the discussion.

## Theology

What do you believe about...everything?

Perhaps read through the [Desiring God Affirmation of Faith](#) to see where each other is on various biblical doctrines.

Discover how you form your views. What is the reasoning-believing process? How do you handle the Bible?

## Worship and Devotion

How important is corporate worship? What about other kinds of participations in church life?

How important is it to be part of a small accountability/support group?

What is the importance of music in life and worship?

What are your daily personal devotional practices? (prayer, reading, meditation, memorization)

What would our family devotions look like? Who leads in this?

Are we doing this now in an appropriate way (praying together about our lives and future, reading the Bible together)?

### **Husband and Wife**

What is the meaning of headship and submission in the Bible and in our marriage?

What are expectations about situations where one of you might be alone with someone of the opposite sex?

How are tasks shared in the home (finances, cleaning, cooking, washing dishes, yard work, car upkeep, repairs, shopping for food, and household stuff)?

What are the expectations for togetherness?

What is an ideal non-special evening?

How do you understand who initiates sex and how often?

Who does the checkbook—or are there two?

## **Children**

If and when, should we have children? Why?

How many?

How far apart?

Would we consider adoption?

What are the standards of behavior?

What are the appropriate ways to discipline them? How many strikes before they're ... whatever?

What are the expectations of time spent with them and when they go to bed?

What signs of affection will you show them?

What about school? Home school? Christian school?  
Public school?

## **Lifestyle**

Own a home or not? Why?

What kind of neighborhood? Why?

How many cars? New? Used?

View of money in general? How much to the church?

How do you make money decisions?

Where will you buy clothes? Department store? Thrift store?  
In between? Why?

## **Entertainment**

How much money should we spend on entertainment?

How often should we eat out? Where?

What kind of vacations are appropriate and helpful for us?

How many toys? Snowmobile, boat, cabin?

Should we have a television? Where? What is fitting to watch?

How much?

What are the criteria for movies and theater? What will our guidelines be for the kids?

## **Conflict**

What makes you angry?

How do you handle your frustration or anger?

Who should bring up an issue that is bothersome?

What if we disagree both about what should be done and whether it is serious?

Will we go to bed angry at each other?

What is our view of getting help from friends or counselors?

## **Work**

Who is the main breadwinner?

Should the wife work outside the home? Before kids? With kids at home? After kids?

What are your views of daycare for children?

What determines where you will locate? Job? Whose job?  
Church? Family?

## **Friends**

Is it good to do things with friends but without spouse?

What will you do if one of you really likes to hang out with  
someone the other doesn't?

## **Health and Sickness**

Do you have, or have you had any, sicknesses or physical problems that could affect our relationship? (allergies, cancer, eating disorders, venereal disease, etc.)

Do you believe in divine healing, and how would prayer relate to medical attention?

How do you think about exercise and healthy eating?

Do you have any habits that adversely affect health?

## 2 THE SURPASSING GOAL: MARRIAGE LIVED FOR THE GLORY OF GOD

My topic for this chapter is “Marriage lived for the glory of God.” The decisive word in that topic is the word “for.” “Marriage lived *for* the glory of God.” The topic is not: “The glory of God *for* the living of marriage.” And not: “Marriage lived *by* the glory of God.” But: “Marriage lived for the glory of God.”

This little word “for” means that there is an order of priority. There is an order of ultimacy. And the order is plain: God is ultimate, and marriage is not. God is the most important Reality; marriage is less important—far less important, infinitely less important.

Marriage exists to magnify the truth and worth and beauty and greatness of God; God does not exist to magnify marriage. Until this order is vivid and valued—until it is seen and savored—marriage will not be experienced as a revelation of God’s glory but as a rival of God’s glory.

I take my title, “Marriage lived for the glory of God,” to be

an answer to the question: *Why marriage?* Why is there marriage? Why does marriage exist? Why do we live in marriages?

This means that my topic is part of a larger question: Why does anything exist? Why do you exist? Why does sex exist? Why do earth and sun and moon and stars exist? Why do animals and plants and oceans and mountains and atoms and galaxies exist?

The answer to all these questions, including the one about marriage is: All of them exist to and for the glory of God. That is, they exist to magnify the truth and worth and beauty and greatness of God. Not the way a *microscope* magnifies, but the way a *telescope* magnifies.

Microscopes magnify by making tiny things look bigger than they are. Telescopes magnify by making unimaginably big things look like what they really are. Microscopes move the appearance of size away from reality. Telescopes move the appearance of size toward reality.

When I say that all things exist to magnify the truth and worth and beauty and greatness of God, I mean that all things—and marriage in particular—exist to move the appearance of God in people’s minds toward Reality.

God is unimaginably great and infinitely valuable and unsurpassed in beauty. “Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised, and his greatness is unsearchable” (Ps. 145:3, ESV). Everything that exists is meant to magnify that Reality. God cries out through the prophet Isaiah (43:6–7, ESV), “Bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the end of the earth, everyone who is called by my name, whom I created *for my glory*” (emphasis added). We have been created to display the glory of God. Paul concludes the first eleven chapters of his great

letter to the Romans with the exaltation of God as the source and end of all things: “For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen” (11:36, ESV, emphasis added). He makes it even clearer in Colossians 1:16, where he says, “By [Christ] all things were created, in heaven and on earth ... all things were created through him and for him” (emphasis added).

And woe to us if we think that “for Him” means “for His need,” or “for His benefit,” or “for His improvement.” Paul made it crystal clear in Acts 17:25 that God is not “served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything” (ESV). No, the term “for His glory” and “for Him” means, “for the display of His glory,” or “for the showing of His glory,” or “for the magnifying of His glory.”

We need to let this sink in. Once there was God, and only God. The universe is His creation. It is not coeternal with God. It is not God. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... . All things were made through him” (John 1:1, 3, ESV). All things. All that is not God was made by God. So once there was only God.

Therefore God is absolute Reality. We are not. The universe is not. Marriage is not. We are derivative. The universe is of secondary importance, not primary. The human race is not the ultimate reality, nor the ultimate value, nor the ultimate measuring rod of what is good or what is true or what is beautiful. God is. God is the one ultimate absolute in existence. Everything else is from Him and through Him and for Him.

That is the starting place for understanding marriage. If we get this wrong, everything goes wrong. And if we get it

right—really right, in our heads and in our hearts—then marriage will be transformed by it. Marriage will become what it was created by God to be—a display of the truth and worth and beauty and greatness of God.

This leads to a very simple conclusion—so simple and yet so far-reaching. If we want to see marriage have the place in the world and in the church that it is supposed to have—that is, if we want marriage to glorify the truth and worth and beauty and greatness of God—we must teach and preach less about marriage and more about God.

Most young people today do not bring to their courtship and marriage a great vision of God—who He is, what He is like, how He acts. In the world there is almost no vision of God. He is not even on the list to be invited. He is simply and breathtakingly omitted. And in the church the view of God that young couples bring to their relationship is so small instead of huge, and so marginal instead of central, and so vague instead of clear, and so impotent instead of all-determining, and so uninspiring instead of ravishing, that when they marry, the thought of living marriage to the glory of God is without meaning and without content.

What would the “glory of God” mean to a young wife or husband who gives almost no time and no thought to knowing the glory of God, or the glory of Jesus Christ, His divine Son...

- › the glory of His eternity that makes the mind want to explode with the infinite thought that God never had a beginning, but simply always was;
- › the glory of His knowledge that makes the Library of

Congress look like a matchbox and quantum physics like a first grade reader;

- › the glory of His wisdom that has never been and can never be counseled by men;
- › the glory of His authority over heaven and earth and hell, without whose permission no man and no demon can move one inch;
- › the glory of His providence without which not one bird falls to the ground or a single hair turns gray;
- › the glory of His word that upholds the universe and keeps all the atoms and molecules together;
- › the glory of His power to walk on water, cleanse lepers, heal the lame, open the eyes of the blind, cause the deaf to hear, still storms with a word, and raise the dead;
- › the glory of His purity never to sin, or to have a two-second bad attitude or evil thought;
- › the glory of His trustworthiness never to break His word or let one promise fall to the ground;
- › the glory of His justice to render all moral accounts in the universe settled either on the cross or in hell;
- › the glory of His patience to endure our dullness for decade after decade;
- › the glory of His sovereign, slave-like obedience to embrace the excruciating pain of the cross willingly;

- › the glory of His wrath that will one day cause people to call out for the rocks and the mountains to fall on them;
- › the glory of His grace that justifies the ungodly; and
- › the glory of His love that dies for us even while we were sinners.

How are people going to live their lives so that their marriages display the truth and worth and beauty and greatness of this glory, when they devote almost no energy or time to knowing and cherishing this glory?

Perhaps you can see why over the last thirty years of pastoral ministry I have come to see my life-mission and the mission of our church in some very basic terms: namely, I exist—we exist—to spread a passion for the supremacy of God in all things for the joy of all peoples. That’s our assessment of the need. Until there is a passion for the supremacy and the glory of God in the hearts of married people, marriage will not be lived for the glory of God.

And there will not be a passion for the supremacy and the glory of God in the hearts of married people until God Himself, in His manifold glories, is known. And He will not be known in His manifold glories until pastors and teachers speak of Him tirelessly and constantly and deeply and biblically and faithfully and distinctly and thoroughly and passionately. Marriage lived for the glory of God will be the fruit of churches permeated with the glory of God.

So I say again, if we want marriage to glorify the truth and worth and beauty and greatness of God, we must teach and preach less about marriage and more about God. Not that we

preach too much on marriage, but that we preach too little on God. God is simply not magnificently central in the lives of most of our people. He is not the sun around which all the planets of our daily lives are held in orbit and find their proper, God-appointed place. He is more like the moon, which waxes and wanes, and you can go for nights and never think about Him.

For most of our people, God is marginal and a hundred good things usurp His place. To think that their marriages could be lived for His glory by teaching on the dynamics of relationships, when the glory of God is so peripheral, is like expecting the human eye to glorify the stars when we don't stare at the night sky and have never bought a telescope.

So knowing God and cherishing God and valuing the glory of God above all things, including your spouse, is the key to living marriage to the glory of God. It's true in marriage, as in every other relationship: *God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him.*

Here is a key that unlocks a thousand doors. Superior satisfaction in God above all earthly things, including your spouse and your health and your own life (Psalm 63:3, ESV, "your steadfast love is better than life") is the source of great long-suffering without which husbands cannot love like Christ, and wives cannot follow like the bride of Christ, the church. Ephesians 5:22–25 makes plain that husbands take their cues of leadership and love from Christ, and wives take their cues of submission and love from the devotion of the church for whom He died. And both of those complementary acts of love—to lead, and to submit—are unsustainable for the glory of God without a superior satisfaction in all that God is for us in Christ.

Let me say it another way. There are two levels at which the glory of God may shine forth from a Christian marriage: One is at the structural level when both spouses fulfill the roles God intended for them—the man as leader like Christ, the wife as advocate and follower of that leadership. When those roles are lived out, the glory of God’s love and wisdom in Christ is displayed to the world.

But there is another deeper, more foundational level where the glory of God must shine if these roles are to be sustained as God designed. The power and impulse to carry through the self-denial and daily, monthly, yearly dying that will be required in loving an imperfect wife and respecting an imperfect husband must come from a hope-giving, soul-sustaining, superior satisfaction in God. I don’t think that our love for our wives or theirs for us will glorify God until it flows from a heart that delights in God more than marriage.

Marriage will be preserved for the glory of God and shaped for the glory of God when the glory of God is more precious to us than marriage. When we can say with the apostle Paul (in Philippians 3:8), “I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” (NASB)—when we can say that about marriage—about our husband or wife—then that marriage will be lived to the glory of God.

I close by trying to say this one more way, namely, with a poem that I wrote for my son on his wedding day.

## Love Her More and Love Her Less

*For Karsten Luke Piper  
At His Wedding to  
Rochelle Ann Orvis  
May 29, 1995*

The God whom we have loved, and in  
Whom we have lived, and who has been  
Our Rock these twenty-two good years  
With you, now bids us, with sweet tears,  
To let you go: "A man shall leave  
His father and his mother, cleave  
Henceforth unto his wife, and be  
One unashamed flesh and free."  
This is the word of God today,  
And we are happy to obey.  
For God has given you a bride  
Who answers every prayer we've cried  
For over twenty years, our claim  
For you, before we knew her name.

And now you ask that I should write  
A poem—a risky thing, in light  
Of what you know: that I am more  
The preacher than the poet or  
The artist. I am honored by  
Your bravery, and I comply.  
I do not grudge these sweet confines  
Of rhyming pairs and metered lines.  
They are old friends. They like it when

I bid them help me once again  
 To gather feelings into form  
 And keep them durable and warm.

And so we met in recent days,  
 And made the flood of love and praise  
 And counsel from a father's heart  
 To flow within the banks of art.  
 Here is a portion of the stream,  
 My son: a sermon poem. Its theme:  
 A double rule of love that shocks;  
 A doctrine in a paradox:

If you now aim your wife to bless,  
 Then love her more and love her less.

If in the coming years, by some  
 Strange providence of God, you come  
 To have the riches of this age,  
 And, painless, stride across the stage  
 Beside your wife, be sure in health  
 To love her, love her more than wealth.

And if your life is woven in  
 A hundred friendships, and you spin  
 A festal fabric out of all  
 Your sweet affections, great and small,  
 Be sure, no matter how it rends,  
 To love her, love her more than friends.

And if there comes a point when you  
 Are tired, and pity whispers, "Do

Yourself a favor. Come, be free;  
 Embrace the comforts here with me.”  
 Know this! Your wife surpasses these:  
 So love her, love her more than ease.

And when your marriage bed is pure,  
 And there is not the slightest lure  
 Of lust for any but your wife,  
 And all is ecstasy in life,  
 A secret all of this protects:  
 Go love her, love her more than sex.

And if your taste becomes refined,  
 And you are moved by what the mind  
 Of man can make, and dazzled by  
 His craft, remember that the “why”  
 Of all this work is in the heart;  
 So love her, love her more than art.

And if your own should someday be  
 The craft that critics all agree  
 Is worthy of a great esteem,  
 And sales exceed your wildest dream,  
 Beware the dangers of a name.  
 And love her, love her more than fame.

And if, to your surprise, not mine,  
 God calls you by some strange design  
 To risk your life for some great cause,  
 Let neither fear nor love give pause,  
 And when you face the gate of death,  
 Then love her, love her more than breath.

Yes, love her, love her, more than life;  
 Oh, love the woman called your wife.  
 Go love her as your earthly best.  
 Beyond this venture not. But, lest  
 Your love become a fool's facade,  
 Be sure to love her less than God.

It is not wise or kind to call  
 An idol by sweet names, and fall,  
 As in humility, before  
 A likeness of your God. Adore  
 Above your best beloved on earth  
 The God alone who gives her worth.  
 And she will know in second place

That your great love is also grace,  
 And that your high affections now  
 Are flowing freely from a vow  
 Beneath these promises, first made  
 To you by God. Nor will they fade  
 For being rooted by the stream  
 Of Heaven's Joy, which you esteem  
 And cherish more than breath and life,  
 That you may give it to your wife.

The greatest gift you give your wife  
 Is loving God above her life.  
 And thus I bid you now to bless:  
 Go love her more by loving less.

## 3 SEXUAL RELATIONS IN MARRIAGE

Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the immoral and adulterous. Keep your life free from love of money and be content with what you have; for he has said, “I will never fail you nor forsake you!” —Hebrews 13:4–5

It is interesting that Hebrews puts money and the marriage bed side by side. I doubt that is a coincidence, since most counselors today would put money and sexual relations near the top of their lists of trouble spots in marriage. Agreement in money matters and harmony in the marriage bed don't seem to come easily. Our focus this chapter is going to be on sexual relations in marriage, not on money.

“Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled.” That is, let sexual relations in marriage be kept pure, clean, free from blemish. All these terms like “undefiled,” “pure,” “clean,” “without blemish” are simply visual or tangible metaphors for a *moral* demand, namely, don't sin in

your sexual relations in marriage. But what is sin? Sin is any act or attitude that displeases God. But I find it very helpful to focus on the essential nature of sin as it relates to the great positive force in Christian life, namely, faith. Hebrews 11:6 says, “Without faith it is impossible to please God.” This implies two things:

1. Since sin is anything that displeases God and since without faith you can't please God, therefore, if you don't have faith, everything you do is sin, because everything you do displeases God.
2. This suggests very strongly that there must be a very close, perhaps causal, connection between the absence of faith and sin. And Romans 14:23 confirms such a connection. It says, “Whatever is not from faith is sin.” In other words, the essential nature of those actions and attitudes which we call sin is that they are not prompted or motivated by a heart of faith. The thing that makes an attitude or act displeasing to God is that it does not grow from faith in God. Sin is evil precisely in its failure to be the product of faith.

### **Faith, Sin, and Sexual Relations in Marriage**

We need to clarify how it is that our actions come “from faith” or not from faith. First of all, what is this faith that produces attitudes and actions which aren't sin? Hebrews 11:1 says, “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” In other words, faith is the confidence we feel in the good things that God has promised to do for us tomorrow and to eternity. We can't see them, but faith has the assurance that the promises in which we hope will come true. Hebrews

11:6, mentioned earlier, says, “Without faith it is impossible to please God. For whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.”

In other words, the faith which pleases God is our coming to him with confidence that, perhaps contrary to all appearances, he will reward us with all the good things he has promised.

Now, how does such faith produce attitudes and acts which are not sin? Go back with me to Hebrews 13:5. “Keep your life free from the love of money and be content with what you have.” The love of money is a desire that displeases God; it is sin. First Timothy 6:10 says, “The love of money is the root of all evils.” Now the antidote to this sinful love and all the evils that grow from it is contentment: “Be content with what you have.” But the writer doesn’t leave us there by ourselves to somehow crank up contentment. But he goes on to give a basis for contentment: “For God has said, ‘I will never fail you nor forsake you.’” The basis for contentment is the promise of God’s unfailing help and fellowship. The promise is taken from Deuteronomy 31:6, “Be strong and of good courage; do not fear or be in dread of them, for it is the Lord your God who goes with you; he will not fail you or forsake you.”

So the writer to the Hebrews is saying this: God has made such comforting, reassuring, hope-inspiring promises in his Word that, if we have faith in these promises, we will be content. And contentment is the antidote to the love of money which is the root of all sorts of evils.

Now we can see more clearly how it is that an action or attitude comes “from faith” or not. If we do not have faith, if we do not trust the promise of God, “I will never fail you nor forsake you,” then we will feel anxious and insecure, and the deceptive

power of money to buy security and peace will be so attractive, that it will start to produce other evils in us. We will be inclined to steal, or lie on our income tax returns, or rationalize why we shouldn't be giving generously to the church, or conveniently forget about a debt we owe a friend, or refuse to spend any money to make our rental property more livable, etc., etc. The evils that come from the love of money are endless. And the reason these evils are sin is that they do not come from faith.

If we have faith in the promise, "I will never fail you nor forsake you," then we will be free from the anxiety and insecurity that craves more money, and we will have victory over the sins that result from the love of money. If you are content in Christ, resting in the promise of God always to help you and stay beside you, then the compulsion to steal and lie on your tax return, and skimp on your giving, and neglect your debts, and oppress poor renters will be gone. Instead there will be an honest day's work, complete accuracy on the tax return, generosity to the church, faithfulness in retiring debts, and doing unto your renters as you would have them do to you. And all this new behavior will not be sin but righteousness, because it comes from faith in the hope-giving promise of God.

Now, just in case you may have lost the connection between all this and sexual relations in marriage, let's go back and pick up the thread. Hebrews 13:4 says, "Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled." That means, "Let the marriage bed be without sin; do not sin in your sexual relations." Now we have seen that sin is whatever is not from faith. Sin is what you feel and think and do when you are not taking God at his word and resting in his promises. So the command of Hebrews 13:4 can be stated like this: Let your

sexual relations be free from any act or attitude that does not come from faith in God's Word. Or to put it positively: Have those attitudes and do those acts in your marital sexual relations which grow out of the contentment that comes from confidence in God's promises.

### **Why Seek Sexual Gratification in Marriage?**

But now immediately a problem emerges. Someone may ask, "If I am content through faith in God's promises, why should I even seek sexual gratification at all?" That is a good question. And the first answer to it is, "Maybe you shouldn't seek any sexual gratification; maybe you should stay single." This is what Paul was urging in 1 Corinthians 7:6-7. He says, "By no means am I commanding everyone to get married and gratify sexual desires. All I'm saying is that sexual desire is okay, and if a person has a compelling desire, marriage is the place to satisfy it." But (verse 7), "I wish that all were (single) as I myself am. But each has his own special gift from God, one of one kind and one of another." This is really a remarkable verse. Paul could wish that everyone were single like him: free from the entanglements of family life and from the strong urge to be married. But he knows that's not God's will: "Each has his own gift from God." God wills some people to be married and some to be single. He does not endow everyone like Paul; some he endows like Peter, who took his wife with him on his missionary travels (1 Corinthians 9:5). So the first answer to the question, "If I have contentment through faith in God's promises, why should I seek sexual gratification?" is, "Perhaps you shouldn't. God may want you single."

But there is a second answer to this question, namely, the contentment that God's promises to give does not mean the end of all desires, especially bodily desires. Even Jesus, whose faith was perfect, got hungry and desired food and got tired and desired rest. Sexual appetite is in this same category. The contentment of faith does not take it away any more than it takes away hunger and weariness. What, then, does contentment mean in relation to ongoing sexual desire? I think it means two things.

1. If gratification of that desire is denied through singleness, then that denial will be compensated for by an abundant portion of God's help and fellowship through faith. In Philippians 4:11–13 Paul said, "Not that I complain of want, for I have learned in whatever state I am to be content ... I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and want. I can do all things through him who strengthens me." If Paul could learn to be content in hunger, then we can learn to be content if God chooses not to give us sexual gratification.
2. The other thing contentment means in relation to ongoing sexual desire is this: if gratification is not denied us but offered to us in marriage, we will seek it and enjoy it only in ways that reflect our faith. To put it another way, while the contentment of faith does not put an end to our hunger, weariness, or sexual appetite, it does transform the way we go about satisfying those desires. Faith doesn't stop us from eating, but it stops gluttony; it doesn't stop sleep, but it keeps us from being a sluggard. It doesn't stop sexual appetite but ... But what? That's what we want to spend the rest of this chapter trying to answer, though space here only allows a very partial answer.

## Faith Believes That Sex Is a Good Gift of God

First of all, when the ear of faith hears the word from 1 Timothy 4:4 that “everything created by God is good and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for then it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer”—when the ear of faith hears that, it believes. And so faith honors the body and its appetites as God’s good gifts. Faith will not allow a married couple to lie in bed and say to themselves, “What we are doing is dirty; it’s what they do in the pornographic movies.” Instead, faith says, “God created this act, and it is good, and it is ‘for those who believe and know the truth’ (1 Timothy 4:3).” It is the world which has plundered God’s gifts and corrupted them by misuse. But they belong rightfully to the children of God, and so faith will not let us view them as worldly or defiled. “Let the marriage bed be held in *honor* by all and the marriage bed be undefiled.”

## Faith Frees from the Guilt of the Past

Secondly, faith increases the joy of sexual relations in marriage because it frees from the guilt of the past. I have in view, mainly, us who are married but have to look back on an act of fornication, or adultery, or incest, or a homosexual fling, or years of habitual masturbation, or preoccupation with pornography, or promiscuous petting, or divorce. And what I have to say to us is this: If it genuinely lies within you, by the grace of God, to throw yourself on the mercy of God for forgiveness, then he will free you from the guilt of the past.

“There is now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1).

“To the one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness” (Romans 4:5).

“Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not reckon his sin” (Psalm 32:1–2).

“He does not deal with us according to our sins nor requite us according to our iniquities. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love towards those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us” (Psalm 103:10–12).

“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

There is no need for a child of God to carry any guilt into the marriage bed. But that takes a solid faith because Satan loves to make us feel unforgiven for the rottenness of our former life. “Resist him, firm in your faith” (1 Peter 5:9). “Quench his flaming darts with the shield of faith” (Ephesians 6:16)—faith in the Son of God who loved you and gave himself for you (Galatians 2:20), who for your sake was made to be sin that you might become the righteousness of God (2 Corinthians 5:21), who bore your sins in his body on the cross (1 Peter 2:24). Lay hold on your forgiveness, and take it with you to the marriage bed.

Christ died for your sin that in him you might have guilt-free sexual relations in marriage.

Now let me clarify something I’ve said before, namely, that even though the guilt of our sin can be washed away, some of the scars remain. I can imagine a couple just before their

engagement sitting together in a park. He turns to her and says, “There is something that I’ve got to say. Two years ago I had sexual relations with another girl. I was away from the Lord, and it was just one night. I’ve wept over that one night many times. I believe God has forgiven me and I hope you can.” In the weeks that follow, not without tears, she forgives him, and they marry. And on their first honeymoon night they lie together, and as he looks at her, the tears well up in her eyes and he says, “What’s the matter?” And she says, “I just can’t help but think of that other girl, that she lay right here where I am.” And years later, when the novelty of his wife’s body has worn off, he finds himself inadvertently drifting back in his imagination to the thrill of that one-night fling. That’s what I mean by scars. And all of us have such scars. All of us have committed sins which, though forgiven, make our present life more problematic than if we hadn’t committed them.

But I do not want to give the impression that Christ is powerless against such scars. He may not remove all the problems that these scars cause us, but he has promised to work even in all these problems for our good if we love him and are called according to his purpose.

Take our imaginary couple I just referred to. I prefer to think that there was a happy ending. They came eventually to a satisfying sexual relationship because they worked at it openly in constant prayer and reliance on the grace of God. They talked about all their feelings. They kept nothing bottled up. They trusted each other and helped each other, and they found their way to peace and sexual harmony and, above all, new dimensions of God’s grace.

Christ died not only that in him we might have guilt-free

sexual relations in marriage, but also that he might then, even through our scars, convey to us some spiritual good.

## **Faith Uses Sex as a Weapon Against Satan**

The third thing now that we can say about faith and sexual relations in marriage is that faith uses sex against Satan. Look at 1 Corinthians 7:3–5.

The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights and likewise the wife to her husband. For the wife does not rule over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not rule over his own body, but the wife does. Do not refuse one another, except perhaps by agreement for a season, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, lest Satan tempt you through lack of self-control.

In Ephesians 6:16, Paul says we should ward off Satan with the shield of faith. Here he says to married people, “Ward off Satan with sufficient sexual intercourse. Don’t abstain too long, but come together soon, so that Satan will gain no foothold.” Well, which is it? Do we guard ourselves from Satan with the shield of faith or the shield of sex?

The answer for married people is that faith makes use of sexual intercourse as a means of grace. For the people God leads into marriage, sexual relations are a God-ordained means of overcoming temptation to sin (the sin of adultery, the sin of sexual fantasizing, the sin of pornographic reading, etc.). Faith humbly accepts such gifts and offers thanks.

Now notice something else in 1 Corinthians 7:3–5. This is

very important. In verse 4 Paul says that the man and the woman have rights over each other's body. When the two become one flesh, their bodies are at each other's disposal. Each has the right to lay claim to the other's body for sexual gratification. But what we really need to see is what Paul commands in verses 3 and 5 in view of these mutual rights. He does not say, "Therefore stake your claim! Take your rights!" He says, "Husband, give her her rights! Wife, give him his rights!" (v. 3). And in verse 4, "Do not refuse one another." In other words, he does not encourage the husband or wife who wants sexual gratification to seize it without concern for the other's needs. Instead he urges both husband and wife to always be ready to give their body when the other wants it.

I infer from this and from Jesus's teaching in general that happy and fulfilling sexual relations in marriage depend on each partner aiming to give satisfaction to the other. If it is the joy of each to make the other happy, a hundred problems will be solved.

Husbands, if it is your joy to bring her satisfaction, you will be sensitive to what she needs and wants. You will learn that the preparation for satisfactory sexual intercourse at 10 p.m. begins with tender words at 7 a.m. and continues through the day as kindness and respect. And when the time comes, you will not come on like a Sherman tank, but will know her pace and bring her skillfully along. Unless she gives you the signal, you will say, "Her climax, not mine, is the goal." And you will find in the long run that it is more blessed to give than to receive.

Wives, it is not always the case, but often, that your husband wants sexual relations more often than you do. Martin Luther said he found twice a week to be ample protection from

the tempter. I don't know if Katie was up for it every time or not. But if you're not, give it anyway. I do not say to you husbands, "Take it anyway." In fact, for her sake you may go without. The goal is to outdo one another in giving what the other wants. Both of you, make it your aim to satisfy each other as fully as possible.

"Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled." That is, do not sin in your sexual relations. And that means, have only those attitudes and do only those acts which come from faith in God's hope-giving promises. We should all regularly ask ourselves: "Does what I am feeling or doing have its roots in the contentment of faith or in the anxious insecurity of unbelief?" That will give you help in hundreds of little and big ethical decisions.

I've simply tried to show the impact of faith on three aspects of sexual relations in marriage. First, faith believes God when he says that sexual relations in marriage are good and clean and should be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. Second, faith increases the joy of sexual relations in marriage because it frees from the guilt of the past. Faith believes the promise that Christ died for all our sins, that in him we might have guilt-free sexual relations in marriage. And finally, faith wields the weapon of sexual intercourse against Satan. A married couple gives a severe blow to the head of that ancient serpent when they aim to give as much sexual satisfaction to each other as possible. It makes me just want to praise the Lord when I think that on top of all the joy that the sexual side of marriage brings, it also proves to be a fearsome weapon against our ancient foe.

## 4 MARRIAGE, SINGLENESS, AND THE CHRISTIAN VIRTUE OF HOSPITALITY

The end of all things is at hand; therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers. Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins. Show hospitality to one another without grumbling. As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

—1 Peter 4:7–11

What's driving this chapter is a desire for Christ to be magnified in the way married people and single people show hospitality to each other. Or, to put it another way, if it's true—which I believe it is—that God's family, that comes into being by new birth and by faith in Christ, is more central and more lasting than families that come into being by marriage and

procreation and adoption, then how that spiritual, eternal family (the church) relates to each other (married and single) is a crucial witness to the world that our lives are oriented on the supremacy of Christ and that our relationships are defined not just by nature, but by Christ. I long to see Christ magnified through married people folding single people into their lives, and single people folding married people into their lives for the sake of Christ and the gospel.

### “Because He Is a Disciple”

Jesus said, “Whoever gives one of these little ones even a cup of cold water *because he is a disciple*, truly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward” (Matthew 10:42). Of course, Jesus also said that we should love our *enemy* (Matthew 5:44), and Paul said to give a cup of water to our *enemy* (Romans 12:20). That kind of love will receive its reward. But *here* Jesus says, Show simple kindness to people precisely *because they are followers of Jesus*. And that too will receive its reward.

In other words, when you look into the eyes of a single person or a married person and you see the face of a follower of Jesus—a brother or a sister of your own eternal family—that relationship with Jesus that you see should draw out your heart in practical kindness—like hospitality—for Jesus’ sake. Jesus is the focus here. He says, do this “*because he is my disciple*.” I will be honored in a special way if you give my disciple a drink for that reason. If you have him into your home, do this for my sake.” That is what I mean when I say, I long to see *Christ* magnified through married people folding single people into their lives, and single people folding married people into their lives.

## The Material World—for the Glory of God

Just a few more words of introduction before we look at the text in 1 Peter. Have you ever asked, Why did God give us bodies and make a material universe? And why does he raise our bodies from the dead and make them new and then liberate this earth so that it is a new earth that we can live on forever in our new bodies? If God meant to have great praise (“Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised,” Psalm 96:4), why not just create angels with no bodies but great hearts who can only speak to God and not to each other? Why all these bodies and why should persons be able to communicate to each other? And why trees and ground and water and fire and wind and lions and lambs and lilies and birds and bread and wine?

There are several deep and wonderful answers to these questions. But the one I want to mention is this: God made bodies and material things because when they are rightly seen and rightly used, God’s glory is more fully known and displayed. The heavens are telling the glory of God (Psalm 19:1). Consider the birds of the air and the lilies of the field and you will know more of God’s goodness and care (Matthew 6:26–28). See in the things he has made his invisible attributes—his eternal power and divine nature (Romans 1:20). Look at marriage and see Christ and the church (Ephesians 5:23–25). As often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you declare the Lord’s death until he comes (1 Corinthians 11:26). Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God (1 Corinthians 10:31). The material world is not an end in itself; it is designed to display God’s glory and awaken our hearts to know him and value him more.

## Making Food and Sex Holy

Physical reality is good. God made it as a revelation of his glory. And he intends for us to sanctify it and worship him with it—that is, to see it in relation to him and to use it in a way that makes much of him and in doing so gives us joy. All of that has direct bearing on marriage and singleness. It protects us from idolizing sex and food as gods. They are not gods; they are made by God to honor God. And it protects us from fearing sex and food as evil. They are not evil; they are instruments of worship—they are ways to make much of Christ. Here's the key text: 1 Timothy 4:1–5. It is one of the most important texts in the Bible on the meaning of physical appetites or sex.

Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer.

Sex and food—two great idols in first-century Asia Minor and twenty-first-century America. And God's response to those who solve the problem of the idolatry of sex and food by merely renouncing or avoiding them is to say these teachers are demonic—"teachings of demons" (v. 1). What is God's solution? Everything created by God is good; nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving and made holy by the word of God and prayer. You make food holy by using

it according to the word of God in Christ-dependent prayer. You make sex holy by using it according to the word of God in Christ-dependent prayer.

### **Making Much of Christ—Single or Married**

All of that is simply introduction to make clear that in the beauty of marriage as a physical parable of the covenant love between Christ and the church, and the beauty of singleness as a physical parable of the spiritual nature of God's family that grows by regeneration and faith, not procreation and sex—to make clear in all these things that neither marriage nor singleness is idolized or feared. Marriage *and* celibacy can be idolatrous. Spouses can worship each other or worship sex or worship their children or worship double-income-no-kid buying power. Singles can worship autonomy and independence. Singles can look on marriage as a second-class Christian compromise with sexual drive. Married people can look upon singleness as a mark of immaturity or irresponsibility or incompetence or even homosexuality.

But what I am trying to clarify is that there are Christ-exalting ways to be married and there are Christ exalting ways to be single. There are ways to use our bodies, our appetites in marriage and in singleness that make much of Christ.

### **That Infamous Sentence in 1 Corinthians 7:9**

And I think I should make just a brief comment about that infamous sentence in 1 Corinthians 7:9: “If they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion.” Remember, this is addressed explicitly to

men *and* women (v. 8). And here is the one thing I want to say about it: When a person seeks to be married, knowing that as a single he or she would “burn with passion,” it doesn’t have to mean that marriage becomes a mere channel for the sex drive. Paul would never mean that in view of Ephesians 5.

Instead when a person marries—let me simply use the man as an example—he takes his sexual desire, and he does the same thing with it that we must *all* do with all our physical desires if we would make them means of worship—1) he brings it into conformity to God’s word; 2) he subordinates it to a higher pattern of love and care; 3) he transposes the music of physical pleasure into the music of spiritual worship, 4) he listens for the echoes of God’s goodness in every nerve; 5) he seeks to double his pleasure by making her joy his joy; and 6) he gives thanks to God from the bottom of his heart because he knows and he feels that he never deserved one minute of this pleasure.

## Magnifying Christ by Showing Hospitality

Now to the text, 1 Peter 4:7–11, and what’s driving this chapter, namely, a desire for Christ to be magnified in the way married people and single people show hospitality to each other. We will walk through the text quickly with brief comments and then draw out simple and obvious implications—and pray that God would use this word powerfully to change us for his glory and our joy.

## The End Is Near

Verse 7: “The end of all things is at hand.” Peter knows that with the coming of the Messiah the end of the ages has arrived

(1 Corinthians 10:12; Hebrews 12:2). The kingdom of God has come (Luke 17:21). And therefore the consummation of all things could sweep the world in a very short time.

Therefore, just as Jesus taught us to be vigilant over our lives and to watch, Peter says (v. 7), “Therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers.” That is, cultivate a very personal relationship with the one you hope to see face to face at his coming. Don’t be unfamiliar with Christ. You don’t want to meet him as a stranger. And seek in prayer all the help you will need in these last days so that you may stand in the days of great stress (Luke 21:36). And don’t depend on your spontaneity to bring you to prayer. “Be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers.”

### **Love Is Paramount**

Then verse 8: “Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins.” Love is paramount, and it will be needed all the more as the end draws near. Why? Because the pressures and stresses and tribulations of the last days will put relationships under tremendous stress. But in these days we will need each other, and the world will be watching to see if we are real: “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35). Will we cover and bear and endure each others’ faults and foibles, or will anger rule our hearts?

### **Hospitality without Grumbling**

Verse 9 gives one form of that love, and is it telling that he mentions doing it without grumbling? “Show hospitality to one

another without grumbling.” If we are loving earnestly and love is covering a multitude of sins, then we will not grumble so easily will we? Love covers much of what makes us grumble. So hospitality without grumbling is the calling of Christians in the last days. In the very days when your stress is high, and there are sins that need covering, and reasons to grumble abound—in those very days, Peter says, what we need to do is practice hospitality.

Our homes need to be open. Because our hearts are open. And our hearts are open because God’s heart is open to us. Do you recall how John the apostle connected the love of God with our love for each other in relation to hospitality? He wrote in 1 John 3:16-17, “By this we know love, that [Jesus] laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. But if anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need [single or married!], yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him?”

### Stewards of God’s Varied Grace

That’s as far as we have space to go in this text. Except to simply point to what happens when we get together in our homes. Verse 10: “As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace.” “Stewards of God’s varied grace!” I love that phrase. Every Christian is a steward—a custodian, a manager, a warden, a distributor, a servant—of God’s varied grace. What a great reason to be alive! Every Christian lives on grace. “God is able to make all *grace* abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work” (2 Corinthians 9:8). If you are afraid of hospitality—that you don’t have much

personal strength or personal wealth—good. Then you won't intimidate anybody. You will depend all the more on God's grace. You will look all the more to the work of Christ and not your own work. And O what a blessing people will get in your simple home. Your little apartment.

## Welcome One Another As Christ Has Welcomed You

So there it is: the Christian virtue of hospitality—a Christ-exalting strategy of love in the last days.

Now some closing applications: First, to everyone. If you belong to Christ, if you have by faith received his saving hospitality, which he paid for with his own blood, then extend this hospitality to others. Romans 15:7: "Welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God." You live on free grace everyday. Be a good steward of it in hospitality.

Second, to married couples. Plan that your hospitality include single people—small groups, Sunday dinners, picnics, holiday celebrations. And don't make a big deal out of it. Just be natural. And don't forget that there are eight-year-old singles and sixty-year-old singles and fifty- and forty- and thirty- and twenty-year-old singles, male and female, formerly married and never married, divorced and widowed. Think like a Christian. This is your family, more deeply and more eternally than your kinfolk.

Third, to single people. Show hospitality to other single people *and* to married couples. Perhaps it seems odd. But should it? Would it not be a mark of unusual maturity and stability? Would it not be a mark of God's grace in your life?

I pray that the Lord would do this beautiful work among

us—all of us. The end of all things is at hand. Let us be sober for our prayers. Let us love each other. Let us be good stewards of the varied grace of God, and let us show hospitality without grumbling. “Welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you.”



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