

**“Did God Really Say: Don’t Act Like You’re Married Until You Are?”**

It’s not too often that I am shocked by what people say to me. But it does happen. At a WELS Tucson Campus Ministry party a number of years ago, I was greeting the students and welcoming them back to school and to Campus Ministry, something that I always enjoy doing. I greeted one particular young man whom I had met before, but who was not frequently in attendance at TCM activities. He glanced at a young lady nearby, whom I knew to be his girlfriend and said, “Pastor, we’re engaged!” As I was about to congratulate him on this milestone in their relationship, he went on to add, “And we’re going to have a baby!”

I really didn’t know what to say. I was surprised, even shocked. If I understood him correctly, and now I know I did, he had just announced to me that he and his girlfriend had been intimate together in the deepest of ways even though they had only recently agreed to get married. In other words, he was announcing to me that he and his girlfriend had been living a sinful lifestyle. At the same time it seemed clear that he didn’t realize it. The way he announced it made it seem as if he had no idea that I or anyone else might possibly object to such a situation. He thought that I would agree that it was wonderful for him to have gotten engaged, and that it was just as wonderful that a baby was already on the way. I didn’t feel that way.

I wondered what had happened to the time when everyone knew that this sort of a relationship was not God-pleasing. People used to call this “living in sin.” People used to know that a baby should really come well after a wedding, and not before, and not too soon after, either.

Now I know that people don’t always realize this. I will not be shocked the next time I hear something like this, in part because I’ve heard about similar circumstances on several occasions since then. I’ve even heard people honestly ask, “Does God really say that we shouldn’t live together?” And that is the reason that we are turning to God’s Word today for *his* answer to the question.

See, this isn’t anything new. Since the fall into sin, human beings have been dealing with sexual temptation and questions about marriage. They have been confused about what is proper and they have failed to act honorably. God needed to set the record straight in his sixth commandment: do not commit adultery. And centuries later, Jesus needed to set the record straight that this wasn’t a narrowly focused commandment, but that it had wider applications. And Paul, God’s chosen apostle to the gentiles, needed to explain it in some detail to the Christian congregation in the cosmopolitan city of Corinth.

The Corinthians had asked. We don’t know exactly the wording of their question, but it obviously had to do with sex and marriage. Paul on a previous occasion had written to them because he was concerned about issues in the congregation, and they had written back. In their reply, they included a number of questions. Paul addressed many of their questions, beginning with this one, in his letter that we call 1 Corinthians.

In Paul’s answer, we find this truth: it is God pleasing for a married couple to enjoy an intimate, physical relationship. God designed marriage that way. But that same sort of relationship outside of marriage is inappropriate. It is sinful.

Some people, like Paul himself, have the gift to live a pure life as a single person. They don’t “burn with passion.” They are able to live an unmarried life in service to God without subjecting themselves to overwhelming temptation. For them, this is good. But not everyone has that gift.

Those who don’t have that gift should get married. In their marriage they can avoid temptations to sin sexually by having a fulfilling relationship with their spouse. To those who are married, Paul writes, “Act like it.” Enjoy this gift of God frequently and regularly. And not in a selfish way, but give yourself to your spouse.

As we examine and consider these verses, we find a list of ways we might, and often do, sin against the sixth commandment. Married couples sin against God's design when they don't live as though they are married, when they leave out for whatever reason the physical aspect of their relationship. There may be brief times when this is appropriate, but that is not to be the standard.

For those who are not married, there are all sorts of temptations. Much of our society tells us that it's OK and even expected to make sex a part of our casual relationships. The message is that it is not a big deal and that there are no rules that we should be bound by. But oftentimes people do know better. They understand that this is a big deal, and so they wait until they are in what they call "a committed relationship." But that's not marriage. That is not a lifelong commitment before God and his representatives to be husband and wife. It is not our job to redefine the standards that God has established.

And don't think that everything is fine as long as we avoid physical intimacy. We are reminded that it is sinful to burn with passion or to look lustfully at others. And even those who might be able to withstand all these various temptations are often guilty of a haughty and self-righteous spirit toward those who do not.

The temptations are many. The sins are many. But there is only one Savior. There is only one who maintained complete purity in regard not only to these sexual sins, but also all other sins. He lived a life perfect in thought, perfect in word, and perfect in actions. His life and his death are the only answer to our lives of sin. Only the forgiveness he won frees us from the guilt of our sin. Only he died to pay the price for our wandering eyes and selfish hearts.

And he deserves our praise and thanks. So we look at the things that we have done wrong, and we strive to correct them. We stop living together with boyfriends or girlfriends. We treat our spouse as our spouse and no one else. Luther summarized the meaning of the sixth commandment by calling on Christians to lead a "chaste and decent" or "pure and decent" life. This is not just about avoiding certain things, particular dangers, or following specific rules. This is about treating God's gifts of marriage and sexuality as the blessings that they truly are. It is setting an example for others. That's why it is even unwise to take the approach that says, "Well, we'll live in the same house, but sleep in separate bedrooms until we are married. After all, that will help us save money." There are better ways to manage money without placing yourself into temptation and without giving others around you the wrong impression of your living situation.

Remember what Jesus told us about temptations, and particularly these sorts of temptations: **"If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell."** This is a serious matter. We don't want to place ourselves into unnecessary temptations, nor to be temptations for others.

A reminder to parents is also appropriate here. You have more influence on and teach your children more than anyone else, often much more than a pastor or Sunday school teacher. You have been given by God the responsibility to teach your children right and wrong. Don't look the other way or approve of sinful behavior. That is not the loving thing to do. Share what God's Word says. Share God's direction, and share the amazing news of forgiveness that empowers your children to live godly lives.

When it came up years ago, I wasn't ready for the comment, "We're getting married! And we're having a kid!" Now I know that many in our world are asking the question: "Did God really say, 'Don't act like you're married until you are'?" Now we are prepared to answer them. Yes, God did. He created marriage as a wonderful blessing, but he has also given clear directions for it. With his blessing and by his grace, we will follow his instructions and appreciate his gift to us.

The Text: 1 Corinthians 7:1–9 (NIV84)

Now for the matters you wrote about: It is good for a man not to marry. <sup>2</sup> But since there is so much immorality, each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband. <sup>3</sup> The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. <sup>4</sup> The wife's body does not belong to her alone but also to her husband. In the same way, the husband's body does not belong to him alone but also to his wife. <sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> I say this as a concession, not as a command. <sup>7</sup> I wish that all men were as I am. But each man has his own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that.

<sup>8</sup> Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I am. <sup>9</sup> But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion.