

**“Remain as you are / but if you don’t”:
Paul on Sexuality & Relationships - 1 Corinthians 7**

ISSUE (PASSAGE)	REMAIN AS YOU ARE	BUT IF YOU DON'T
Sexual contact (1-7)	No sexual contact (1)	Be a faithful spouse (2)
	Don't abstain from sex (3-5a)	But if so temporary, by consent (5b)
	NOT A COMMAND—CONCESSION TO DIVERSE GRACE-GIFTS CHARISMA (6-7)	
Single/Widows (8-9)	Good to remain single (8)	But if your passions are too much, get married (9)
Married	Don't separate (10), don't divorce (11)	But if you separate, stay separated (11);
		Or if you separate, return to your spouse (11).
Married to an unbeliever (12- 16)	Don't divorce an unbelieving spouse (12-14). If you stay, they are sanctified (made holy).	But if the unbelieving spouse wants a divorce, let them (15), you're not bound.
Circumcision (17-19)	Live as God called you (17) Stay circumcised (18), Stay uncircumcised (18)	But circumcision is nothing, just obey God (19)
Slavery (21-23)	Live as you were when you were called (20, 24)	
	If you were a slave, don't worry (21)	But if you're freed, be free (22) Slaves of God, don't be slaves of people (23)
Single (25-26)	Opinion: stay single (26)	But I have no command for you (25)
Divorced (27- 28)	Married: Don't pursue divorce (27), Divorced: Don't seek remarriage (27)	But if you marry, it's not a sin (28), it's just more difficult (28)
Married (29-35)	In these times, if you're married, live as if you aren't (29-31)	
	Unmarried people can think about how to please God, married people must worry about the world—i.e. how to please their spouse (32-34).	But these aren't restrictions, they are benefits (35)
Engaged (36-39)	If your heart is settled, stay engaged (37)	But if you're stressed, marry (36)
	Staying engaged, abstinent is better (39)	But if you marry, you do well (38)
Widows (39-40)	Remain widows to be happier (40)	But if you marry, 'in the Lord' (39)

Pauline Principles on Marriage & Sexuality in 1 Cor. 7

1. Paul distinguishes between commands, opinions and concessions.

Paul is speaking as a church community consultant. He is forthright in sharing his advice as convictions and opinions, without elevating them as God's laws to be obeyed. If they choose otherwise, he does not regard their choices as disobedience or sin. He concedes to their choices, even when he sees them taking a less preferable path.

2. Paul distinguishes between rules and grace-gifts.

At the same time, while his rules-of-thumb are for their benefit, he also sees that their choices are reflections of God's grace. These are not merely concessions to a lesser way, but may be rooted in the *charisms* of God in each individual. If so, they've actually chosen the better way.

3. Paul distinguishes laws from benefits.

Paul's suggestions are not laws for the law's sake. His agenda in every case is to ask, "What will be most beneficial for this person in this case?" If it is more difficult to remain as you are, don't. But understand that not remaining as you are may be even more difficult. He is assessing the benefits to the individual, to couples and to the kingdom of God.

4. Paul distinguishes his opinion from Jesus or God's Spirit.

Paul reminds the Corinthians when he is not echoing a command of Jesus but also when he thinks he might have wisdom from the Holy Spirit. But even then, he leaves it for them to discern and to act according to conscience.

5. Paul understands diversity.

Paul obviously understands the diversity of gifts, passions, experiences and needs that ordain the church. Everyone has a unique story that will form their specific response to his general principals. That diversity includes brokenness for which there is abundant grace and gifts that are to be celebrated. No single-brush law can circumscribe issues as complex as human relationships and sexuality.

6. Paul understands the human condition.

Paul knows what it is to be human. He knows how difficult it is to be a single, passionate male who abstains from sexual expression. He knows that it is TOO difficult for some. He knows that marriage can be very difficult. TOO difficult for some. He's a realist who is aware of the sexually dysfunctional marriages, the broken homes and the aching grief of widows and widowers. He gets it and makes a generous space for the complex reality of the human condition. His gospel is up for it.

7. Paul understands contextual relativism.

In Corinth, he must also pastor believers who've come into the faith from promiscuous, incestuous and polygamous relationships. He applies grace, boundaries and correction according to the situation. It's not "anything goes" but neither is it "one ring to rule them all." Further, for whatever reasons (his eschatology? persecution?) he believes they are in a unique situation of urgency that affects their orientation toward relationships in that moment. Other contexts will arise that may call us to use his general pattern while adjusting the application to the need of the hour.

Questions: The Trajectory of 1 Corinthians 7 for Sexuality & Relationships Today

How do we apply Paul's principles to this moment?

If you're gay, abstain ... but if you can't get married?
And might he have added, "In Christ, there is neither male nor female, straight nor gay?"

Do we hear an abiding word from Christ oozing through the perplexed and perplexing situational opinions of Paul? Is there a third way that transcends the spectrum of the "anything goes" libertine "hook-up culture" and the now-discredited path of Evangelical "purity culture"? Will we simply follow the culture into amorality and boundary-less promiscuity of "sex-positivity"? Or will we beat a path of retreat to the genophobic bunkers of prurient pretend puritanism? How about NO!

How about this, instead? What if instead of either throwing up our arms or folding them tightly, we opened them wide by distilling the previous seven points into a "now-word"?

As a test-case, how might Paul inform my personal response to LGBTQ+ friends? (I don't speak for any church).

1. Relationship first

I would want my LGBTQ+ friends to know how God and I **completely** love them—I love them for who they are and as they are today. Their sexuality does not in any way jeopardize that commitment. I am with them and for them, just as Christ is, as they live their journey.

2. Listening

I would acknowledge that sexuality is as **complex** as every individual's story. I would not presume to impose my categories or impose blanket assumptions. Rather, I would want to hear their stories and would ask for grace to ask earnest questions that belie my ignorance. Because *all* sexuality is so complex, I may at any given moment be dealing with people whose hetero- or homosexuality is a mixed expression of rebellion, confusion, wounding and/or grace, beauty and love. We are also all at different stages in a lifelong journey of many

different paces. All of this seems so obviously above my paygrade of discernment that I can't declare blanket condemnation OR validation. What then can I do?

3. Holy Spirit

I am not a pastor, counselor or therapist. I walk with my own spiritual and sexual limp. But I can be a friend who offers the gift God has given me: helping others hear the voice of Grace for themselves and encouraging them to follow her into fullness of life. I would encourage listening to her wisdom and surrendering to her care, alleviating whatever fears they have.

Test Case

As I came around to these thoughts, I had a good opportunity to practice them while visiting a church in the "Bible Belt." One of the pastors there happens to be a lesbian and I had the most amazing encounter with her. I stuck to my 3-part plan:

- ***Relationship first: I'm with her and for her on her journey.***
- ***Sexuality is complex: Listen to her story.***
- ***Give her my best gift: Ask her to hear Jesus for herself.***

During the weekend, I invited the whole group to meditate on Psalm 23. What would it be like to meet the good and gentle Shepherd in the "green pastures" of our hearts? How would he come to us? What would he do? What would he say?

My new friend found herself in a big colorful wildflower meadow, knee-deep and apparently about 5-years-old (super significant to her backstory). Her hands were full of wildflowers. Jesus stood in front of her, radiant. He took her face in both hands and would not let her avert her eyes. He said to her, *"You ravish me with your beauty."* She let that sink in and fill her eyes with tears. Then he said, *"You are safe."* That was it. And she melted.

After that, she said this of that moment: *"It has truly slain me and arrested me, intoxicated me. Evoking desire and transfigured, it feels like electric bones of woven light inside me!"*

What an incredible image! I asked, teasing, "So, did he de-gay-ify you?" She just laughed. "Nope!"

To summarize,

- ***we affirm the person and our relationship,***
- ***we acknowledge their journey, and***
- ***we welcome the Spirit to speak to them and guide them.***

An LGBTQ+ Sex Ethic

In the spirit of authentic listening, Eden and I attended a *Generous Space* event. We found diverse and painful stories of panel members very humbling. For me, it was time for silence

and empathy—a space to truly hear what LGBTQ+ Christians face in our culture and our churches. I recognized the deep harm many have undergone.

I also discovered a sex ethic there that does *not* say “anything goes” and in fact challenges the great beams in many a heterosexual eye. One resource pushed back against promiscuity and hook-up culture. It also suggested the many ways marital sex can also be sinful. The ethic was straightforward. Healthy sexuality of any orientation needs to be:

- **Relational**
- **Respectful**
- **Responsible**

I need not expand. Readers can work it out. But I can contract: it’s about LOVE. Just as it was for Paul. First Corinthians 7 says much more than “remain as you are, but if you don’t, okay.” It says that absolutely everything we say about sexuality and relationships (including the saying) is circumscribed in the Great Commandment of self-giving, others-centered love.

When I get that right in my own relationships, maybe I’ll have more to say to others.

Along with this sex ethic, I was able to glean three deep needs of the queer community and transpose them to invitations back to the broader community. They longed openly for the justice of the biblical prophets and the gospel of Jesus Christ. They were inviting potential allies to Christ’s banqueting table marked by:

- **Equity**
- **Diversity**
- **Inclusivity**

And this cuts both ways. It’s not about shifting the balance of power to a new progressive power-base that “others the other,” excludes and cancels. It’s about serving one another in love and inviting even the “older brother” to stay and celebrate. Lucky for me. Truly.

The Blanket Descends Again

I’ve been sitting on something for 15 years. I’m now ready to stand on it.

In 2006, I wrote the following in *Kissing the Leper: Seeing Jesus in the Least of These*:

During a trip to Wales, UK ... I was able to testify to how I see a precious church in Llanelli already living their faith with Jesus’ eyes, an open table, and a narrow path. Their passion for worship and justice deeply impacted my heart.

After the final session, one of their members approached me with this message:

As I listened to you talk about the way Christ has opened up his temple and his table, I felt concerned. I found your radically open invitation troubling. I started objecting, “But Lord, *you* said this and that in your Word!”

At that point, Peter’s vision in Acts 10 came to mind. I remembered how Peter saw a great sheet descending from heaven, full of unclean things. When the Lord told him, “Take and eat,” Peter was shocked! He objected, “No Lord! I’ve never eaten anything unclean!” He *knew* what the Law—*God’s Law*—said about such things. He was confident that he knew God’s final word on the matter. [Does that sound familiar?] And God rebuked Peter: “Do not call anything impure that God has declared clean.” Just then, some “unclean” Gentiles knocked at his door. Peter got the message.

I felt that God was telling me, “I am doing a new thing as in the days of Peter, the blanket, and my open door to the Gentiles. It is not as though I did not give this Word in the first place, but this is a new season.

“The blanket is coming down again. And you will be as shocked as Peter because you are godly and you do know my Word. Now you are saying, “But Lord, you said...” But I am the Lord and while I do not change, I reserve the right to change you—to change your heart and your eyes—to change how you see my plans for this season.

Frankly, the message alarmed me. I have no desire to teach things that contradict Scripture or sound theology. Yet I felt its weight. I realized that Peter’s hesitancy to embrace the vision was rooted in a rigid forgetfulness. Had not Jesus already declared “all foods clean” (Mark 7:19)? And hadn’t he repeatedly welcomed Gentiles, women, and children to his table? Hadn’t the Holy Spirit already been poured out on “all flesh” on the Day of Pentecost? Had they all forgotten so quickly? Or couldn’t they see the connection? And now, how about us?

God’s reminder to Peter ignited a paradigm-shattering revolution in the church. It resulted in the inclusion of Jew and Greek, male and female, slave and free (Gal. 3:28). As Peter’s eyes were opened, the church remembered and responded. They began to see Christ in unexpected places and in surprising people... *remember to see!*

I stand by those words. But I didn’t fill in the blanks. *WHY* did the message alarm me when the church I was pastoring was already inclusive of little children, people with disabilities, addicts of every stripe and the poor? It was because I knew in that moment exactly to whom Christ was now referring. In *Kissing the Leper*, I didn’t recount my silent prayer back to God in that moment. It went like this:

Me: *“Shit. It’s the gays, isn’t it?”*

God stayed quiet. But I don’t mean silent.

Me: *“We’re not ready.”*

I meant, *I’m scared. Not ready to face the wrath of those who aren’t ready.*

And God stayed quiet. But I don’t mean silent.

He waited for me.

He waited a long time—
even if it's only to say this little piece,
this little peace.

Faith Communities

I will leave it to those with skin in the church leadership game to work out these implications in their congregations. I will, however, venture a humbled(d) opinion—I, not the Lord—but *what if* we explored combining:

- *the three-fold Pauline principle for relationships in 1 Cor. 7,*
- *the three-fold LGBTQ+ Christian sex ethic, and*
- *the three-fold invitation I learned at the GS event.*

What if we applied that recipe for a congregation's treatment of queer members and a denomination's treatment of their affirming congregations? Not as policy but as orientation:

Our Orientation

- *we affirm the relationship.*
- *we acknowledge the journey.*
- *we welcome the Spirit to guide them.*

- *we will be relational.*
- *we will be respectful.*
- *we will be responsible.*

- *we will pursue equity.*
- *we will welcome diversity.*
- *we will practice inclusivity.*

What would be the fruit? Here's one example by way of a follow-up email I received yesterday from my Bible Belt gay sister:

I sat with Jesus again today in my field of wildflowers and Jesus said to me, "I see you, I cannot turn my eyes from you, you have captured my heart." The tears of being intimately seen, in the places so raw and vulnerable, the sweetest touch in the deepest wounds, now pour forth streams of living waters.