

marriage

Less About Intimacy in Marriage

A glimpse at 1 Corinthians 7:5-6

Do not deprive each other except perhaps 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. I say this as a concession, not as a command. 1 Corinthians 7:5-6

There are times in marriage that a Christian couple may refrain from intimacy. When Paul addresses that topic here he seems to indicate that the couple may agree on this while they give their full attention to a spiritual focus. Perhaps they want to spend extra time in prayer or bible study and they choose to set aside their intimacy as husband and wife in an effort to grow spiritually. Think of it much like the more familiar practice of fasting, where people set aside food to devote themselves to a spiritual focus. That is the idea Paul is addressing here.

However, fasting and sexual abstinence in marriage are not as familiar today and we may just skip over this verse as if it has nothing to say to us. Our spiritual growth plans don't include abstinence in marriage so we move on to the next thought. But there *are* times that married couples abstain from intimacy for *other* reasons and perhaps Paul's warning should be given some attention.

There are many situations that may impact a couple's intimacy. If married couples have a new baby, they set intimacy aside for a time; or one partner may be a military member who is stationed away from the family. There are times of depression, illness, chemotherapy, or caring for a loved one with a prolonged illness. Menopause and aging may change the frequency that a couple is intimate. And to be honest sometimes the days and weeks or even months just go by for no specific reason. To these situations Paul's words of advice ring loud and clear. "Come together again so that Satan will not tempt you." God knows that those times may exist in a marriage but he warns that you not let them extend longer than necessary because you may be putting yourself in danger of temptation. It may take a new mother a while before she is interested or able to be intimate, and business trips or military deployments aren't shortened for lonely spouses. One who is depressed or chronically ill may not be able to engage in sexual activity but their healthy spouse may have desires that need to be considered. Schedules are off, timing is wrong, body clocks don't match, and time goes by. It happens—but it is your responsibility as husband and wife to keep the time in check.

Paul's words draw us to see that while sometimes these situations cannot be helped, they should be as brief as possible. Our attention is also drawn to see the realistic truth that marriages without intimacy can be a red flag because they put people at risk of temptation. Yes, there are times it happens and couples need to be patient and understanding; they need to talk about it, and share their thoughts, struggles and possible solutions. They need to be mindful and open about the fact that God's plan for marriage does include intimacy. If couples face longer periods without intimacy God wants us to exercise caution so that we don't fall into temptation.

If left unchecked a spouse may be weak in fighting temptation and overlook or excuse sexual sins. Pornography calls out with its vulgar taunting. One might be tempted to find gratification for sexual desires outside the blessing of marriage. The danger here cannot be overstated. Sexual needs and desires are not easily set aside. The door to sexual temptation flings wide open with little more than a glance. It is a quick enticing moment that snares men as godly as David and as wise as Solomon. It snares godly women who are looking for love or longing for a tender relationship. Satan plants the seed that you have unbearable needs and desires that must be fulfilled; he wants you to focus on your needs and forget about God. The Lord's way out of temptation is for husbands and wives to cling to Christ's strength. Focus on and emulate his selfless love that looks to the good of the other. Talk about those needs and address them as a couple; get counseling or talk to your pastor. Don't let time go by without recognizing the importance of sexual intimacy in marriage. Don't let Satan have a foothold when one spouse is unable or struggling and the other is frustrated. Talk, pray for wisdom, and be sensitive to one another in discussing solutions.

God doesn't establish a specific number of days or a set period of time because every couple is different and every situation is unique. There is no simple solution that will apply to everything couples encounter. But God does call husbands and wives to be wise; and to be warned; this is nothing to play with or ignore. If intimacy gets moved to the bottom of the priority list for a time, make sure the priority list gets a healthy review fairly soon. When there is failure and weakness remember the grace of Christ and his perfect forgiveness! Be patient, loving and understanding; just don't be foolish because your flesh is very weak.

The situation Paul describes might not ring true to what you intend for your marriage but his words are the truth of God. The Lord loves marriage and gave it as a gift to husbands and wives. His instruction and encouragement is found throughout the pages of Scripture and we would do well to take these words to heart. Heed the warning, embrace the design, and trust his help and forgiveness. He wants your marriage to succeed; and our faithful Lord will bless you to that end.

Prayer:

Jesus, you are the lover of our souls and the giver of good gifts. Thank you for the gift of marriage and intimacy that brings delight and strengthens love. In your great wisdom you have brought this truth to light that we must not allow thoughtless periods of abstinence in our marriage. When the situation is difficult and intimacy must be set aside, give us patience in dealing with one another; and keep us faithful to our vows. Grant us the openness to talk about our situation and find solutions that please you and keep us close. And Lord for those times that we are careless with your gift, we pray for forgiveness and awareness. Help us see Satan as a roaring lion seeking to devour us and destroy our marriage. Grant us peace in knowing that your love and good gifts protect us and keep us close to you and one another. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.