



Biblically, How Far Can Christians Go Physically/Sexually Before Marriage?

Description



Someone recently sent me an email asking about this and it

seemed like a good topic for an article.

This is something of a continuation of my recent crusade against the idea that Christians can have sex outside of marriage, which I covered various aspects of in the following articles:

- [Yes, The Bible CLEARLY Says Sex Outside of Marriage is Wrong](#)
- [What are Concubines in the Bible? Were They Wives or Unmarried Mistresses?](#)
- [What is Betrothal in the Bible? Is it the Same as Modern Engagement?](#)

Today, we'll look at another verse that touches on this, and this verse weighs in quite clearly on what Christians cannot do sexually/physically before marriage.

The One Clear Passage

The only passage that appears to weigh in on this clearly is 1 Corinthians 7:1, though I've included verse 2 for context.

1 Corinthians 7:1-2

1 Now concerning the things about which you wrote, **it is good for a man not to touch a woman.**

2 But because of sexual immoralities, each man is to have his own wife, and each woman is to have her own husband.

Please notice the two highlighted words because they will be important, and we'll look at them one at a time.

Also noticed that part of the concern here is "sexual immoralities". I go to great length defining the underlying Greek word in my article: [Yes, The Bible CLEARLY Says Sex Outside of Marriage is Wrong](#), so see that article for the evidence. Basically, it means: "all sex outside of marriage"; see the article for details.

Now we'll look at the words highlighted above, starting with "touch".

"Touch"

You should know that some poor translations don't translate verse 1 literally. The most common mistranslation is translating the word Greek word "???????" ([haptomai](#)) as "sexual relations". We'll look at its definition in a moment, but here are a few examples of mistranslation first:

1 Corinthians 7:1

NIV: Now for the matters you wrote about: "It is good for a man not **to have sexual relations** with a woman."

NLT: Now regarding the questions you asked in your letter. Yes, it is good to abstain from **sexual relations**.

ESV: Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: "It is good for a man not **to have sexual relations** with a woman."

(Yes, I consider the ESV to be a poor translation because it mistranslates with alarming frequency, even completely flipping the meaning of some passages; more details in [my article on Bible translations](#).)

Again, the Greek word translated "touch" is "???????" ([haptomai](#)), and here's a slightly truncated definition from Thayer's Greek lexicon:

1. properly, to fasten to, make adhere to; hence, specifically to fasten fire to a thing, **to**

kindle, set on fire,

2. Middle (present ???????); imperfect ??????? (Mark 6:56 R G Tr marginal reading); 1 aorist ??????; in the Sept. generally for ?????? , ????????? ; properly, **to fasten oneself to, adhere to, cling to** (Homer, Iliad 8. 67);

a. **to touch**, followed by the object in genitive (Winers Grammar, § 30, 8 c.; Buttmann, 167 (146); cf. Donaldson, p. 483): Matthew 8:3; Mark 3:10; Mark 7:33; Mark 8:22, etc.; Luke 18:15; Luke 22:51 — very often in Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

...

In classic Greek also ????????? is the stronger term, denoting often to lay hold of, hold fast, appropriate; in its **carnal reference** differing from ????????? by suggesting **unlawfulness**. ?????????, is used of touching by the hand as a means of knowledge, handling for a purpose; ????????? signifies **to feel around with the fingers or hands, especially in searching for something, often to grope, fumble**, cf. ????????? blindman's buff. Schmidt, chapter 10.)).

A few things to notice:

1. The word can be used to mean to kindle something or to set something on fire. Think about that in this context for a moment...
2. Often, the word simply means “touch”. It’s a normal word for this and is used — for example — of Jesus touching people to heal them.
3. In a sexual context, as it’s used here, it suggests “unlawfulness” and can mean **“to feel around with the fingers or hands, especially in searching for something, often to grope”**

Did you notice that last word?

How about that highlighted phrase?

Do I *really* need to spell out the application?

“Good”

Now, the phrase “*it is good for a man not to touch a woman*” is liable to be misunderstood by English speakers because of how we use the word “good”. We tend to use it as a mild word, often opposed to words like “great” or “excellent”. However, Greek has more than one word for “good” and the one used here is quite illuminating.

It’s the Greek word “?????” ([kalos](#)), and here’s the definition from Thayer’s Lexicon:

?????, ?????, ????? (probably primarily ‘sound,’ ‘hale,’ ‘whole ;’ cf. Vanicek, p. 140f; Curtius , § 31), the Sept. for ????? **beautiful, but much more often for ??? good; beautiful, applied by the Greeks to everything so distinguished in form, excellence, goodness, usefulness, as to be pleasing; hence (according to the context) equivalent to “beautiful,**

handsome, **excellent**, eminent, choice, surpassing, **precious**, useful, suitable, **commendable, admirable**“;

a. beautiful to look at, shapely, magnificent: ?????? ?????? ???????????? (A. V. goodly), Luke 21:5.

b. **good, excellent in its nature and characteristics**, and therefore well adapted to its ends: joined to the names of material objects, universally, 1 Timothy 4:4 (**equivalent to pure**);

c. **beautiful by reason of purity of heart and life**, and hence praiseworthy; **morally good, noble**,

d. **honorable, conferring honor**:

Thus, while “good” is an accurate translation, it falls short of the scope of the word because it means more than just “good”. It means morally good, praiseworthy, excellent, and noble. Thus “noble” seems to capture the nuance better.

Putting it together

Here’s the verse again, and bear in mind what we just saw.

1 Corinthians 7:1-2 (*modified*)

1 Now concerning the things about which you wrote, **it is noble for a man not to touch a woman**.

Remember, “touch” can mean “*to feel around with the fingers or hands*” or “*to grope*”. Also remember that it can refer to kindling a fire, which has an obvious sexual application. Thus, God is saying that it’s noble for a man not “to feel around with the fingers or hands” or to “grope” a woman.

Do I need to clarify the application of this? Probably not; you all are smart. ? (*I will later for the skeptics anyway though*)

I translated the verse this way, and I think it captures the essence of the verse without over-translating: (*The italicized word “sexually” indicates a translator addition for clarity’s sake*)

1 Cor 7:1 ([My translation](#))

Now, about what you wrote. It’s noble for a man to not touch a woman *sexually*.

Here’s the footnote that I wrote for “touch”:

“touch” this Greek word has the basic meaning of “touch” It’s most often used to indicate a simple touch, like Jesus “touching” various sick people to heal them. However, it can vary

considerably in nuance depending on the context. At the other end of the spectrum, it can mean to “touch sexually”, which is interesting considering the same word can also be used of kindling a fire. It can also mean to “fasten or adhere to” perhaps in an affectionate sense, like how we would use the words “snuggle” or “cuddle”. It can also mean to feel around with the fingers; i.e. to “grope”.

I would imagine that you’re getting a pretty clear idea of what scripture is saying, but we’ll look at two other, less clear passages before tying it all together.

Other, Less Clear Passages

There are two other places (*or four, depending on how you count*) where the Bible gives an indication, though both are less clear than 1 Corinthians 7:1.

1 Timothy 5:2

This verse isn’t on the topic of sexuality, but there’s perhaps some tangential connection.

1 Timothy 5:2

1 Do not sharply rebuke an older man, but *rather* appeal to *him* as a father, *to* the younger men as brothers,

2 the older women as mothers, *and the younger women as sisters, in all purity.*

Contextually, this is about rebuking someone, not sexual matters. You could also argue that it’s about how to appeal to someone, but again that’s still not about sexual matters.

However, the admonition to treat younger women as sisters “in all purity” seems like it would apply in all areas of life, not just rebuking and appealing. However, then we would need to get into a discussion on what “purity” means. (*I kid you not, I’ve had people tell me that sex outside of marriage is “pure”.*)

There’s no help from the Greek word definition either, since it simply means “pure” with almost no additional nuance from the lexicons. That’s why I consider this an “unclear” passage on this topic, since it doesn’t give us direct clarity like 1 Cor 7:1 does.

Song of Solomon

In three places, we have the same admonition in the Song of Solomon:

2:7 I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem,
By the gazelles or by the does of the field,
Do not stir up nor awaken love
Until it pleases.

3:5 I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem,
By the gazelles or by the does of the field,
Do not stir up nor awaken love
Until it pleases.

8:4 I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem,
Do not stir up nor awaken love
Until it pleases.

The traditional Christian understanding of this verse is that we shouldn't "stir up" sexual desire until after marriage. That does seem to be the intended sense, though it's not stated as clearly as 1 Cor 7:1 is. This makes perfect sense in light of 1 Cor 7:1, and it makes the most sense contextually, so that's how I take it.

However, I have heard other interpretations that aren't impossible, even if they don't fit the context as well. That's why I sort this into the "less clear" category.

Now, we'll look at the application.

Application

Based almost entirely on 1 Cor 7:1, but also taking into account the other two verses, **what God wants seems clear: no sexual contact before marriage.**

None.

No groping, no "petting", and definitely no "heavy petting", even when those things are done over clothes. **No touching each other sexually in any way whatsoever.** This might come as a "shock", but Christian standards of purity exist for a reason, even if some fail to meet them.

Now, while that's clear from scripture, it does leave a host of things up in the air. For example, what about non-sexual kissing before marriage, or cuddling/snuggling in a non-sexual way? (*While watching a movie for example.*)

I don't plan to address anything like that in this article, but I will suggest one thing to think about:

1 Corinthian 10:23

All things are lawful, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful, but **not all things edify**.

Just because you can do something doesn't mean that you should do that thing. **This applies to both doing things and also to forbidding things.** You can do the thing, but that doesn't mean you should; you can decide to not do something, but again, that doesn't mean you should become dogmatic about it if the scriptures aren't. (*The Pharisees fell into this latter trap.*)

Much about our lives is left to wisdom and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Pray about it if you aren't sure, and honestly ask God to give you wisdom.

(And since I know someone will ask my opinion, I'm of the "if you aren't 100% sure, wait until you are sure" camp with things like this. Better to wait and feel sure, than to do something you're unsure about and have it bother your conscience later. I would get some clarity before acting, and wouldn't act without that clarity.)

Conclusion

According to 1 Cor 7:1, it's noble for a man not to touch a woman. The word translated "touch" seems to apply to any kind of sexual touch whatsoever. The word "noble" indicates moral good and something that's beautiful because it's good. Thus, God is pretty clear that a Christian should not touch a woman sexually until he has married her. This is supported by two other passages, though admittedly they are less clear than 1 Corinthians 7:1.

Please notice that this one verse completely prohibits sex outside of marriage.

There's a hard limit about no sexual touching, but other touching isn't much commented on. My guess that's because Christianity must fit into many cultures. In some cultures, kissing someone when you meet is normal. (*either on the cheeks or even lips in some places*) However, in other cultures it's a taboo.

This article's intent isn't to wade into the quagmire of what non-sexual touching should and shouldn't be allowed before marriage. That's left to wisdom, with the caveat that just because you can do something, doesn't mean you should do something. When in doubt, ask God for wisdom. If you aren't sure, my personal opinion is that it's wise to avoid doing something until you are sure if it's a wise thing to do. (*Which applies to many other areas, not just this*)