

# St. Jerome on marriage

Dalrock | 20 December, 2016 | by Dalrock

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The other day ConantheContrarian asked for a source for the idea that it is shameful for a man to have passion for his wife. I offered the example of [St. Jerome in Against Jovinianus \(Book I\)](#), written in AD 393:

Hence Xystus in his Sentences tells us that “He who too ardently loves his own wife is an adulterer.” It is disgraceful to love another man’s wife at all, or one’s own too much. A wise man ought to love his wife with judgment, not with passion. Let a man govern his voluptuous impulses, and not rush headlong into intercourse. There is nothing blacker than to love a wife as if she were an adulteress.

As foreign as this concept may seem today, for significant periods in Christian history this has been a widely held view. Jerome held extreme anti marriage views, but the quote above is a sentiment you will see as well from the much more moderate St. Augustine, and even fits fairly well with [this argument](#) by Pope John Paul II\*.

Having shared Jerome’s more tame arguments on marriage in Against Jovinianus, I thought I would share some of his more extreme arguments in the same piece. Time permitting I’ll do a follow up post with some of Augustine’s more moderate arguments.

I’ll start with Jerome’s striking interpretation of 1 Cor 7:1, explaining that Paul is saying sex in marriage is evil, albeit a lesser evil (all emphasis mine).

“It is good,” he says, “for a man not to touch a woman.” **If it is good not to touch a woman, it is bad to touch one:** for there is no opposite to goodness but badness. **But if it be bad and the evil is pardoned, the reason for the concession is to prevent worse evil.** But surely a thing which is only allowed because there may be something worse has only a slight degree of goodness.

Jerome continues to 1 Cor 7:2, explaining that Paul was referring to Christians who were married before becoming Christians, and encouraging married Christians to not have sex unless they felt that they could not otherwise contain themselves:

But, because of fornications let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband. He did not say, because of fornication let each man marry a wife: otherwise by this excuse he would have thrown the reins to lust, and whenever a man’s wife died, he would have to marry another to prevent fornication, but have his own wife. Let him he says have and use his own wife, **whom he had before he became a believer, and whom it would have been good not to touch,** and, when **once he became a follower of Christ, to know only as a sister, not as a wife** unless fornication should make it excusable to touch her.

Next he explains that 1 Cor 7:3-5 is saying that while it would be better for a married Christian to abstain from sex, they are duty bound to do so if their spouse wishes, even though married sex is bad because it is incontinence that hinders prayer:

But inasmuch as he who is once married has no power to abstain except by mutual consent, and may not reject an unoffending partner, let the husband render unto the wife her due. He bound himself voluntarily that he might be under compulsion to render it. Defraud ye not one the

other, except it be by consent for a season, that you may give yourselves unto prayer. **What, I pray you, is the quality of that good thing which hinders prayer?** Which does not allow the body of Christ to be received? **So long as I do the husband's part, I fail in continency.** The same Apostle in another place commands us to pray always. **If we are to pray always, it follows that we must never be in the bondage of wedlock, for as often as I render my wife her due, I cannot pray.**

Jerome moves on to interpreting 1 Pet 3:

When he says likewise, he challenges the husbands to imitate their wives, because he has already given them commandment: 1 Peter 3:2-3 beholding your chaste conversation coupled with fear. Whose adorning let it not be the outward adorning of plaiting the hair, and of wearing jewels of gold, or of putting on apparel: but let it be the hidden man of the heart, in the incorruptible apparel of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price. You see what kind of wedlock he enjoins. Husbands and wives are to dwell together according to knowledge, so that they may know what God wishes and desires, and give honour to the weak vessel, woman. **If we abstain from intercourse, we give honour to our wives: if we do not abstain, it is clear that insult is the opposite of honour.** He also tells the wives to let their husbands see their chaste behaviour, and the hidden man of the heart, in the incorruptible apparel of a meek and quiet spirit. Words truly worthy of an apostle, and of Christ's rock! He lays down the law for husbands and wives, condemns outward ornament, while he praises continence, which is the ornament of the inner man, as seen in the incorruptible apparel of a meek and quiet spirit. In effect he says this: **Since your outer man is corrupt, and you have ceased to possess the blessing of incorruption characteristic of virgins, at least imitate the incorruption of the spirit by subsequent abstinence...**

To Jerome, it seems that any piece of Scripture can be read as a condemnation of marriage:

Proverbs 30:15-16 The horseleech had three daughters, dearly loved, but they satisfied her not, and a fourth is not satisfied when you say Enough; the grave, and woman's love, and the earth that is not satisfied with water, and the fire that says not, Enough. The horse-leech is the devil, the daughters of the devil are dearly loved, and they cannot be satisfied with the blood of the slain: the grave, and woman's love, and the earth dry and scorched with heat. It is not the harlot, or the adulteress who is spoken of; but **woman's love in general is accused of ever being insatiable**; put it out, it bursts into flame; give it plenty, it is again in need; it enervates a man's mind, and engrosses all thought except for the passion which it feeds. What we read in the parable which follows is to the same effect: For three things the earth does tremble, and for four which it cannot bear: for a servant when he is king: and a fool when he is filled with meat: for an odious woman when she is married to a good husband: and an handmaid that is heir to her mistress. **See how a wife is classed with the greatest evils.** But if you reply that it is an odious wife, I will give you the same answer as before—the mere possibility of such danger is in itself no light matter. For he who marries a wife is uncertain whether he is marrying an odious woman or one worthy of his love. If she be odious, she is intolerable. If worthy of love, her love is compared to the grave, to the parched earth, and to fire.

\*To my knowledge none of these arguments represent Catholic doctrine.