

Further Teaching on Marriage and Celibacy

1 Corinthians 7:17-40

1 Corinthians 7:17-40: *“But as God has distributed to each one, as the Lord has called each one, so let him walk. And so I ordain in all the churches. **18** Was anyone called while circumcised? Let him not become uncircumcised. Was anyone called while uncircumcised? Let him not be circumcised. **19** Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing, but keeping the commandments of God is what matters. **20** Let each one remain in the same calling in which he was called. **21** Were you called while a slave? Do not be concerned about it; but if you can be made free, rather use it. **22** For he who is called in the Lord while a slave is the Lord’s freedman. Likewise he who is called while free is Christ’s slave. **23** You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men. **24** Brethren, let each one remain with God in that state in which he was called. **25** Now concerning virgins: I have no commandment from the Lord; yet I give judgment as one whom the Lord in His mercy has made trustworthy. **26** I suppose therefore that this is good because of the present distress—that it is good for a man to remain as he is: **27** Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be loosed. Are you loosed from a wife? Do not seek a wife. **28** But even if you do marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned. Nevertheless such will have trouble in the flesh, but I would spare you. **29** But this I say, brethren, the time is short, so that from now on even those who have wives should be as though they had none, **30** those who weep as though they did not weep, those who rejoice as though they did not rejoice, those who buy as though they did not possess, **31** and those who use this world as not misusing it. For the form of this world is passing away. **32** But I want you to be without care. He who is unmarried cares for the things of the Lord—how he may please the Lord. **33** But he who is married cares about the things of the world—how he may please his wife. **34** There is a difference between a wife and a virgin. The unmarried woman cares about the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and in spirit. But she who is married cares about the things of the world—how she may please her husband. **35** And this I say for your own profit, not that I may put a leash on you, but for what is proper, and that you may serve the Lord without distraction. **36** But if any man thinks he is behaving improperly toward his virgin, if she is past the flower of youth, and thus it must be, let him do what he wishes. He does not sin; let them marry. **37** Nevertheless he who stands steadfast in his heart, having no necessity, but has power over his own will, and has so determined in his heart that he will keep his virgin, does well. **38** So then he who gives her in marriage does well, but he who does not give her in marriage does better. **39** A wife is bound by law as long as her husband lives; but if her husband dies, she is at liberty to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord. **40** But she is happier if she remains as she is, according to my judgment—and I think I also have the Spirit of God.”*

Background Notes

In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul answered specific questions that the Corinthian Christians had raised in a letter to the apostle. *“Now concerning the things which you wrote to me”(v1).*

The Corinthians had a number of questions about marriage and celibacy. Paul answered some of these questions earlier in chapter 7. He covered the responsibilities and requirements of husbands and wives in a marriage relationship and the

matter of separation and divorce. He discussed “mixed marriages,” and when the unbeliever decides to stay or leave the marriage.

In the rest of the chapter the apostle answered further questions about marriage and celibacy. Once again, remember that when Paul made a statement like this in verse 25, “*That I have no commandment from the Lord.*” His point is that, in the Gospel accounts, the Lord Jesus did not answer these specific questions when He spoke about marriage.

So now the apostle Paul, ***under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit***, gave his opinion on further questions. And because this is written scripture, it is the authoritative word of God. The same is true of verse 40: “*But she is happier if she remains as she is, according to my judgment—and I think I also have the Spirit of God.*”

Paul’s opinion here carries **biblical authority** because, as the *inspired writer*, he has the mind of the Holy Spirit. This epistle, therefore, is written Scripture.

Doctrinal Point:

1. Decisions about change should be made in light of one’s call.

Verse 17: “*But as God has distributed to each one, as the Lord has called each one, so let him walk. And so I ordain in all the churches.*” In the context of the verses leading up to verse 17, Paul was speaking about remaining in your marital relationship when you become a Christian, whether your spouse becomes a Christian or not.

He now expanded this directive to a more general principle. When you become a Christian, stay put! Start where you are. Don’t expect a big change in your circumstances. If you are called to Christ as a Jew, don’t try to become a Gentile. If you are called to Christ as a Gentile, don’t try to become a Jew. If you are called to Christ as a slave, now be a Christian slave. If you are called to Christ as a free person, use that freedom to serve Christ. Remain in the condition in which you were called. Verse 20: “*Let each one remain with God in that state in which he was called...*” And verse 24: “*Brethren, let each one remain with God in that state in which he was called.*”

Obviously, if you are living in an immoral situation when you become a Christian, you should change that condition! But other than that, stay put. Be the best Christian you can be in your situation. Let God open the doors for any changes you should make.

Most likely, any changes in your condition will be in light of your situation when you were saved. The Lord can and will use your background and your experience. So when you make any decisions about changes, keep in mind the situation and surrounding and conditions that existed when you were saved. Decisions about change should be made in light of one’s call.

2. Decisions about marriage should be made in light of one's call.

Verses 25-35: *“Now concerning virgins: I have no commandment from the Lord; yet I give judgment as one whom the Lord in His mercy has made trustworthy. I suppose therefore that this is good because of the present distress—that it is good for a man to remain as he is: Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be loosed. Are you loosed from a wife? Do not seek a wife. But even if you do marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned. Nevertheless such will have trouble in the flesh, but I would spare you.*

But this I say, brethren, the time is short, so that from now on even those who have wives should be as though they had none, those who weep as though they did not weep, those who rejoice as though they did not rejoice, those who buy as though they did not possess, and those who use this world as not misusing it. For the form of this world is passing away.

But I want you to be without care. He who is unmarried cares for the things of the Lord—how he may please the Lord. But he who is married cares about the things of the world—how he may please his wife. There is a difference between a wife and a virgin. The unmarried woman cares about the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and in spirit. But she who is married cares about the things of the world—how she may please her husband. And this I say for your own profit, not that I may put a leash on you, but for what is proper, and that you may serve the Lord without distraction.”

The word “virgins” (v25) refers to both males and females. In other words, celibacy is desirable, but not demanded. Obviously, if you're married when you become a Christian, you stay married. But if you're single when you become a Christian, think through very seriously whether you should remain single or get married.

Verse 26 indicates that, at that time, there were persecutions or difficult circumstances that were not conducive for married life. Obviously the responsibilities and concerns of marriage and family would take time away from full commitment to the Lord's work. Verses 25-26 once again, *“Now concerning virgins: I have no commandment from the Lord; yet I give judgment as one whom the Lord in His mercy has made trustworthy. I suppose therefore that this is good because of the present distress—that it is good for a man to remain as he is”* In other words, if you were single when God called you, carefully consider remaining single so that you can more fully serve the Lord - especially in stressful circumstances.

Furthermore, for the committed Christian, everything from weeping, to rejoicing, to using the things of this world - **all** should be in subordination to serving the Lord! And this is not as easy to do when you have family responsibilities, so you may want to stay single if that's the state in which God called you. However, it's not wrong to get married. Just be sure to think it through carefully, and make the right decision.

Verses 36-38: *“But if any man thinks he is behaving improperly toward his virgin, if she is past the flower of youth, and thus it must be, let him do what he wishes. He does not sin; let them marry. Nevertheless he who stands steadfast in his heart, having no necessity, but has power over his own will, and has so determined in his heart that he will keep his virgin, does well. So then he who gives her in marriage does well, but he who does not give her in marriage does better.* These are difficult verses to interpret. In fact they may be the most difficult verses in the whole book of 1 Corinthians.

In any case, who is the “*man*” in these verses, and who is the “*virgin*”? There are a couple of possibilities, depending on both the translation and in the interpretation. One possibility is that the man is the father of a virgin daughter. Another possibility is that the man is a potential bridegroom and the virgin is his fiancé. A third possibility is that the man is a single man who is considering his own virginity and the possibility of marriage. As I said, this is not an easy passage to interpret.

However, the overall conclusion is easy to see. It is right and proper to marry, but if a believer can handle being single, celibacy is better in many ways because of the freedom to serve the Lord more effectively.

The apostle Paul is certainly “Exhibit A” in this connection! If the apostle Paul had been married, he could not have been as effective in the traveling missionary ministry to which he was called. Committed single Christians today need to ask themselves, “What ministry or service has God called me to do for Him?” Decisions about marriage should be made in light of one’s call.

Practical Application:

If you marry, marry in the Lord!

Verses 39-40, *“A wife is bound by law as long as her husband lives; but if her husband dies, she is at liberty to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord. But she is happier if she remains as she is, according to my judgment—and I think I also have the Spirit of God.”*

Verse 40, by the way, is not a contradiction to 1 Timothy 5:14. There the apostle Paul urged the younger widows at Ephesus to remarry rather than to be a financial responsibility and burden to the local church.

Romans 7:2 teaches the same truth as verse 39: *“For the woman who has a husband is bound by the law to her husband as long as he lives. But if the husband dies, she is released from the law of her husband.”* Verse 39: *“A wife is bound by law as long as her husband lives; but if her husband dies, she is at liberty to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord.”*

To be married “in the Lord” means not only to marry a Christian – it also means to **marry in the Lord’s will**. Many Christian marriages result in sorrow when the marriage was not made in the will of the Lord. Two Christians, yes, but not two Christians who were seeking God’s will for their lives.

Don’t marry “just any Christian”! **Wait for God’s choice!** So if you decide to marry, be **sure** to **marry in the Lord**.