

SHOULD CHRISTIANS MARRY?

1 CORINTHIANS 7:1-40

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Paul's immediately preceding discussion of prostitution leads him to focus on questions that the Corinthians had raised regarding marriage. Who should marry? Who should remain single? How should husbands and wives relate to each other? These practical matters occupied the apostle throughout chapter seven.

GENERAL OUTLOOKS ON MARRIAGE (7:1-9)

7:1. Paul began this section by referring to **the matters** that the Corinthians' **wrote about** (7:1). Paul had previously corresponded with the church (5:9), and they had replied with their own letter (16:17). In this chapter Paul began to respond to a number of issues that the Corinthians had raised in their letter. Paul began with the expression "**now for**" (*peri de*) ("now concerning" NASB, NRSV, NKJV) here and elsewhere to indicate that he was responding to questions the Corinthians had raised in their correspondence to him. He introduced several topics in this way: marriage and celibacy (7:1-40); meat sacrificed to idols (8:1-11:1); gifts of the Spirit (12:1-14:40); offerings (16:1-4); and Apollos' whereabouts (16:12).

The apostle began by focusing on a particular statement sent to him. The fact that the Corinthians questioned Paul regarding this matter indicates that disagreement existed within the Corinthian church over this issue. Some members of the Corinthian church had gone to the opposite extreme of those who had justified joining themselves to prostitutes (6:12-20). They claimed that it was **good for a man not to marry**. The NIV translation obscures the meaning of the statement (but see the NIV marginal note). The NRSV ("It is well for a man not to touch a woman") and NASB ("It is good for a man not to touch a woman") translate more literally ("touch" rather than "marry") to indicate that sexual relations in and of themselves are not good. It is stated without qualification, implying that the best choice for everyone in every circumstance is to abstain from sexual relations.

Some interpreters have understood these words to state Paul's own position. This understanding, however, is less than convincing. In light of Paul's love for the Old Testament Scriptures (Rom. 1:2; 15:4; 2 Tim. 2:15; 3:16) that advocate marriage (Gen.

2:18; Prov. 18:22) and children (Gen. 13:16; 15:5; Ps. 127:3) as blessings from God, it seems unlikely that Paul himself would have suggested celibacy for all people. In fact, Genesis 2:18 says, "It is not good for the man to be alone." Paul may have paraphrased the position of others in this way to contrast it with the Old Testament outlook. He knew that God himself ordained marriage for the betterment of humanity. Like Jesus before him Paul saw celibacy as an unusual condition (Matt. 19:12; 1 Cor. 7:7, 26-27). The statement probably reflects an attitude expressed by someone else in the Corinthian church.

7:2. To distance himself from the statement delivered to him, Paul raised an issue that should have put the matter to rest. In contrast to the categorical denial of sexual relations, Paul insisted that **each man should have his own wife, and each woman should have her own husband**. The verb "have," used in a sexual context, does not suggest initiating a marriage, but continuing a sexual relationship. It is best to understand Paul not as exhorting unmarried people to marry, but rather married people to carry on continuing sexual relationships with one another (compare 1 Cor. 5:1). In support of this view, it should be pointed out that the Corinthian statement spoke of sexual relations between men and women in general, but Paul selected a more specific word for males which the NIV rightly translates **husband**.

Paul went on to state his reason (**since**) for this viewpoint. His concern was not theoretical, but pastoral. He focused on the fact that there was **so much immorality**. This is most reasonably seen as a reference to the Corinthian church's problems with prostitution (6:15-16) and incest (5:1). While some within the church justified incest and visiting prostitutes, others advocated abstinence even within marriage.

In Paul's mind there was a connection between these two problems. He believed that these opposite problems were caused by certain Corinthians refusing to have sexual relations with their spouses. To avoid the sexually immoral use of prostitutes, Paul insisted that married couples should fulfill each other's needs.

Some scholars believe that a faction of women within the Corinthian church may have advocated abstinence within marriage, and that Paul mainly addressed them here. If this is correct, then this division within the church would not only have split the body of believers, but the families within that body by estranging husbands from wives. Thus, Paul may have been working to reconcile families as well as to protect the sanctity of the church.

7:3-4. Marriage protects against the temptations of immorality only when it functions properly. For this reason, Paul spoke explicitly about the **marital duty** that enjoins partners. The Bible often speaks of sexual relations as a privilege and blessing (Prov. 5:18-19; Songs 1:2; 4:9-16; 7:6-13), but married couples also have a duty not to refrain from sexual relations without just cause (Exod. 21:10). The Corinthians were defrauding one another of their sexual rights, so Paul pointed out the obligations to sex that married couples bear. In so doing, he made certain to let them know that these

obligations were mutual — the husband has a duty to have sexual relations with his wife just as she has a duty to have sex with her husband. Neither partner has the right without good cause to refuse the other.

Paul expressed his view in a remarkable way. **The wife's body does not belong to her alone but also to her husband**, or as the NASB and NRSV put it, “the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does.” Unfortunately, these words have been used to excuse physical abuse by husbands against their wives. They have also been used to compel women to submit to their husbands sexual desires even when these women suffer from physical impairments and illnesses. We must recognize, however, that other teachings of Scripture, such as self-protection and the principle of love, inform us of limitations on Paul's statement. Paul spoke of normal circumstances; he did not try to delineate all of the exemptions from this general rule.

It is important to note that in regards to the issue of authority, Paul emphasized complete parity and mutuality. **The husband's body does not belong to him alone but also to his wife**. Wives have the same authority over their husbands bodies that husbands have over their wives'. The husband's headship over his wife (Eph. 5:23) does not give him the right to demand or practice sexual relations in any way he desires. Such relations must be mutually agreeable. Couples should strive toward the ideal of marriage of which Paul spoke as they evaluate their specific situations and responsibilities. Neither husbands nor wives have license to force abusive sexual desires on their spouses.

7:5-6. In the Christian ideal, spouses must not sexually deprive partners except **by mutual consent for a time**, and only for special religious purposes: **that you may devote yourselves to prayer**. Throughout the Old Testament, times of special religious devotion, such as to prayer and fasting, included sexual abstinence (Exod. 19:15; 1 Sam. 21:4-5). Here Paul made it apparent that such practices were to be carried over into the New Testament as well.

Once the time of special religious devotion is over, the couple must return to normalcy **so that Satan will not tempt** them to be involved in illicit sexual relations. Paul may well have had in mind the prostitution rampant in Corinth (6:12-20). The longer couples abstain from sex, the greater the risk that one or the other partner will lose self-control and fall into sexual immorality with someone other than his or her spouse.

In allowing couples to abstain from sexual relations for a time by mutual consent, Paul made a **concession**. He by no means intended to **command** periods of abstinence. Rather, he commanded that they **not deprive each other**, making exception only for periods of devotion to prayer.

7:7. Paul also qualified his affirmation of marriage by admitting that in one sense he wished **all men** were as he. By the phrase “**as I am**,” Paul apparently referred to his

unmarried status, and may also have meant to include the fact that he did not burn with passion (compare 7:8-9). Not much is known about Paul's marital history, though it is likely that he was married at one time because marriage was required of rabbis in his day. If Paul was an ordained rabbi, he must have been married for a while, but nothing is known about what happened to his wife. She may have died, or she may have left him when he converted to Christianity. Whatever the case, Paul was single and free from burning sexual passion when he wrote this letter, and he admitted that he saw advantages for everyone in this condition.

Even so, Paul recognized that God does not call all people to single lives unburdened by sexual passion, **but each man has his own gift from God**. In other words, God blesses one person with the call to be single, and another he calls to marriage. In other passages Paul spoke of the variety of gifts distributed by the Spirit (Rom. 12:6-8; 1 Cor. 12:1-11,28-31; Eph. 4:8-13). In all of these passages, he indicated that God gives these gifts — they are not the creations of human desire or enterprise — and therefore each various gift is good.

While it is true that some gifts are greater than others (1 Cor. 12:31), this greatness does not depend upon an inherent superiority of the gift, but rather on the benefit it brings to the church (1 Cor. 14:1-4). In the particular time and situation that Paul addressed in Corinth, it appeared to him that singleness without sexual passion offered more benefits to the church than did marriage. This does not mean that he thought celibacy was necessarily a superior gift to marriage in all instances, and it does not diminish the high value of the gift of marriage. Instead, celibacy was more beneficial in Corinth's particular situation. Further, by pointing out that God gifts different people in different ways, Paul subverted any possibility that reproach might fall on those who married, and removed the opportunity for those who remained single to become prideful in their ability to resist passion.

7:8. Paul concluded his general outlook on marriage by applying his views to the **unmarried and the widows**. He advised that **it is good for them to stay unmarried**. The language "it is good" again alludes to Genesis 2:18 where God said of Adam's singleness, "It is *not* good." In contrast with Genesis 2:18, Paul said that remaining single *is* good. Paul's viewpoint did not contradict Genesis. Genesis sets up marriage as a creational pattern that remains ordinary, proper, and good for human life in general. Yet, Paul recognized that celibacy had certain benefits over marriage in some situations. He did not immediately state these benefits or situations, but revealed several complex ideas underlying his preference for singleness in 7:29-35. Most significantly, he believed that marriage distracted believers from living **in undivided devotion to the Lord** (7:35). Spouses must please each other, and this relationship necessarily complicates service to God (7:34).

7:9. Nevertheless, Paul also recognized that reality is usually not ideal. So, he conceded a hierarchy of preferences, with celibacy being the most desirable for the unmarried Corinthians. But **the unmarried and the widows** were to **marry** if they could

not **control themselves** sexually. Marriage was not as advantageous as celibacy, but it was better than **burn[ing] with passion**. The earlier portion of this verse strongly suggests that Paul did not have in mind mere lust of the heart. Literally, he did not say “if they are not able to control themselves,” but “if they do not control themselves,” that is, “if they lose control and fall into sexual immorality.” Paul did not suggest that marriage would eliminate lustful thoughts. He merely suggested that it could help keep believers from involving themselves in physical sexual immorality.

DIVORCE (7:10-25)

With his basic outlook established, Paul turned to address the issue of divorce. He dealt with this matter on two levels: divorce between two believers (7:10-11); and divorce between a believer and an unbeliever (7:12-25).

7:10-11. Paul began by addressing divorce between two believers. He introduced his **command** with the notation that Jesus himself authorized his viewpoint. As an apostle, Paul had the responsibility and right to establish moral guidelines for the church (5:5,12; 6:18; 7:5,8). He did not need to appeal to Jesus (**not I, but the Lord**), but he did so here to give his words extra weight, perhaps because this issue was so controversial among the Corinthians. The most relevant teaching of Christ on this subject appears in Mark 10:11-12 (see also Matt. 19:9).

Paul first stated the general policy to be followed: **a wife must not separate from her husband**. He followed with similar instructions to men: **a husband must not divorce his wife**. The terms **separate** and **divorce** were not distinguished in Paul’s day as they are in many cultures today. To separate was to divorce. Jesus made the exemption of fornication legitimate grounds for divorce (Matt. 19:9). Paul argued that desertion was also grounds for divorce (7:15). With these exemptions in mind, Paul stated plainly that believers must not practice divorce.

In a day when divorce among believers is increasingly commonplace, it is important to be reminded of the broader biblical outlook on divorce (Mal. 2:14-16; Matt. 5:32; Luke 16:18). It is also necessary to reaffirm the importance of forgiveness for and forbearance with those who fall into the sin of illegitimate divorce. Paul was realistic enough to know that illegitimate divorces happen among believers. For cases of illegitimate divorces, Paul offered two choices: **remain unmarried** or **be reconciled** to the original spouse. Paul did not comment on what to do if attempts to reconcile are rebuffed. The rest of Scripture and prudence must guide believers in such situations.

7:12-13. After dealing with divorces between believers, Paul turned to the difficult circumstance of divorces between believers and unbelievers (7:12-16). He addressed **the rest**, that is, believers in marriages unlike those described in 7:10-11. Specifically, he spoke to believers married to unbelievers. In contrast with his previous directives regarding divorce (7:10), Paul admitted that this teaching was his own, **not**

from **the Lord**. This qualification does not lessen the authority of the teaching because as an apostle Paul spoke on behalf of the Lord (7:40; 14:37). Paul merely meant that, to his knowledge, Jesus had not spoken about marriages between believers and unbelievers during his earthly ministry.

Paul's position is rather straightforward. Believers should not divorce their unbelieving spouses so long as the unbelievers are **willing to live with** the believing spouses. This rule applies equally to men (7:12) and women (7:13). Often religious differences between spouses will lead to serious tensions in the home, but Paul plainly stated that religious differences per se are illegitimate grounds for divorce.

7:14. Paul justified (**for**) his position in two ways. First, he stated that the **unbelieving husband** and **unbelieving wife** have **been sanctified through** the believing **wife** and **husband**. The term **sanctified** ("made holy" NRSV) in this case simply denotes being made special or set apart for God's use or purposes (compare Rom. 15:16; 1 Tim. 4:5; 2 Tim. 2:21; Heb. 9:13; 10:29; 1 Pet. 3:15). It does not mean that these unbelievers are redeemed or justified in Christ. If they had been redeemed or justified, they would not have been called **unbelieving**. Rather, **through** the believing spouses (see also 7:12), the unbelieving spouses participate in the community of the sanctified people of God. The effects of Christ in the lives of believers also influence unbelieving spouses.

To be sure, this sanctification process is different in each marriage. Some unbelieving spouses will eventually become believers through their association with their believing spouses (7:16). Other unbelievers will hardly respond at all to the sanctifying influences of their believing spouses. Nevertheless, in the very least these unbelievers come into contact with the gospel and Christian graces in ways that ordinary people never experience.

In extreme cases where the believing community is becoming utterly corrupted by unbelieving spouses, divorce may be necessary (Ezra 10:2-5,10-11,19). Yet, Paul insisted that the influence, whether great or small, of the believing spouses on unbelieving spouses demonstrates that believers should not initiate divorce against unbelieving spouses.

Paul's viewpoint on the sanctification of unbelieving spouses does not rest on a long-standing or well-known tradition. Moreover, experience tends to convince many believers that they have little or no influence over their unbelieving spouses. For these reasons, Paul defended his position by noting a belief that he and the Corinthians shared. He said that **otherwise** (i.e., if it were not true that unbelieving spouses are sanctified) the **children** of these marriages **would be unclean**. But it was inconceivable both to the Corinthians and to Paul that the **children** of believers could be anything but **holy**. The apostle's words assume a teaching that appears throughout the Bible: the children of believers are special in God's eyes, even though they are not

necessarily redeemed. The term **holy** derives from the same root as **sanctified** earlier in this verse.

These children are not necessarily believers, but they are the expected heirs of the covenant relationship that their believing parents enjoy with God (Gen. 15:18; 17:7-8; 26:2-5; Lev. 26:45; 1 Kgs. 11:12; Ps. 89:29,36; Rom. 11:28). The apostle Peter also noted the special status of children of the covenant when he said, “The promise is for you and your children” (Acts 2:39). Though they may not be saved, the children of believers are obligated to obey God’s covenant. If they obey the covenant in Christ by repenting and believing the gospel, they receive all the promised covenant blessings (Lev. 26:3-13; 40-45). If they remain unconverted, however, they become subject to the curses of the covenant (Lev. 26:14-39).

7:15. Despite the potential for positive influence from believers in religiously mixed marriages, Paul knew the reality that unbelievers often do not want to remain in these marriages. For this reason, he added that **if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so**. Believers are under no obligation **in such circumstances** to hold their marriages together. One interpretation of this verse suggests that to oppose the unbeliever’s pursuit of divorce is to neglect the fact that **God has called us to live in peace**. Alternatively, the believer’s call to live in peace may be seen as his or her call to remain with an unbelieving spouse.

In many Christian traditions this passage has been used to support the idea that desertion in addition to fornication (Matt. 5:32; 19:9) is a legitimate ground for divorce. In light of the fact that those who fail to provide for their families are “worse than an unbeliever” (1 Tim. 5:8), some believe that desertion may be legitimate grounds for divorce even when the deserting partner claims to be a believer. The act of desertion presumably disproves his or her profession of faith.

7:16. In this verse Paul summarized his reasoning throughout this passage. Why did he call for hesitation over divorcing unbelievers? In effect, he said that we cannot know how God will use us in the lives of unbelieving spouses. God’s ways are hidden from us, and often believing spouses become the instruments through which unbelievers come to faith. This is why Paul insisted that believers remain with their spouses unless the unbeliever refuses to continue the marriage.

STAY WHERE YOU ARE (7:17-24)

Reflecting on what he had just said about marriage (7:1-16) and anticipating what he was about to say about virgins (7:25-40), Paul digressed to discuss one of his guiding principles. He discussed a **rule established for all the churches** (Compare Acts 15:5-29; Gal. 2:11-21). Paul summarized the rule in this way: **each one should retain the place in life that the Lord has assigned to him and to which God has**

called him (7:17). He repeated this rule nearly verbatim in 7:20 and 24 to emphasize its importance.

7:17. Throughout this passage Paul spoke of God's calls to believers — calls both to salvation and to various tasks (7:17,18,20,21,22,24). This emphasis on "call" expanded and further explained his statement in verse 15 that "God has called us to live in peace." Believers live in peace partly by knowing and following God's call.

It is important to remember that Paul did not suggest that believers should never change their status (7:21). He merely said that they should seek to know how **God has called** them, and to **retain** the places God has **assigned** them. In effect, his general rule was: Christians should remain as they are in relationships and service unless God assigns them new tasks.

This passage relates to the issues of marriage and divorce in that it grounds Paul's conclusions regarding marriage in the broader principle of divine calling. God has called believers in different ways and to different walks of life. Some of these walks of life include marriage, some include divorce, some include widowhood, and some include virginity or celibacy.

Paul had begun this chapter by referring to the Corinthians' letter to him touching on the subject of what was "good" and "better" (7:1-9), implying that the Corinthians were interested in finding the best thing to do. As in chapters 1-4 of this letter in which Paul rebuked the Corinthians for their interest in following the best leader, the Corinthians' pursuit of better conjugal lifestyles had led the church into sin (7:2). This might lead one to suspect that at least some of the Corinthians had motives that were not entirely pure. Some may have wanted to involve themselves in the best marital arrangements in order to gain greater status within the church. Paul's point, however, was that obedience to God is what counts, not status, marital or other. The Corinthians should have been content in their stations in life because those were the stations to which God had assigned them and in which God planned to use them. Certain stations were by nature preferable to others, but no station was more meritorious than another. Paul illustrated his arguments regarding marriage by appealing to circumcision and slavery, two more status-laden issues.

7:18-19. Paul introduced the topic of circumcision to illustrate his position further. He stated plainly that a man should not automatically seek to change his condition (7:18). In bold terms he insisted that **circumcision is nothing** and **uncircumcision is nothing**. Throughout his ministry, Paul opposed Jewish Christians who wanted to force Gentile converts to be circumcised. He reminded the Corinthians that he always defended the uncircumcised in the church (Rom. 2:25-29; 3:29-30; 4:9-14; Gal. 2:3-9; 5:2-12; 6:12-15; Eph. 2:11; Phil. 3:2-7; Col. 2:11-13; 3:11), not allowing others to convince them that being circumcised was meritorious for salvation or for status in the church (compare Gal. 2:12; 6:13). At other times, Paul encouraged uncircumcised Gentile believers not to despise their Jewish brethren (Rom. 11:13-18).

Whether circumcised or uncircumcised, believers should remain as they are and not let others press them to change. No one should take pride in his circumcised or uncircumcised status. At one point, Paul encouraged Timothy to be circumcised for the sake of peace in the church, though never allowing that circumcision might be thought meritorious for salvation. In general, however, he believed that the uncircumcised should remain so. The only truly important thing is obedience to **God's commands** (compare Rom. 2:25-29). As far as Paul was concerned, circumcision no longer bound believers. Only the spiritual devotion to God it signified continued for them.

By making this comparison between marriage and circumcision, Paul indicated that marital status was insignificant for one's standing before God and within the church. Just as believers should not seek to change the status of their circumcision to gain approval before God or man, they also should not seek to change their marital status for these reasons.

The fact that God saved believers in various marital conditions indicated to Paul that salvation requires no particular marital status. God calls believers of various marital positions to serve him, and no one should look down on those of less advantageous or preferable marital status.

7:20. Verse 20 serves mainly a rhetorical function, reasserting Paul's main point as outlined in verse 17. It concisely concludes the argument from circumcision and segues into the argument from slavery and freedom. Its repetition here and in verse 24 emphasizes the fact that this is the primary thing Paul intended this entire section of argumentation to prove.

7:21. Regarding slavery, Paul reminded the Corinthians that he had a similar policy. If someone was a **slave** when he or she became a believer, then that person should not immediately feel any need to change his social status. Paul conceded, "**If you can gain your freedom, do so.**" He knew that slavery is not the ideal condition for human beings, and he wished that no one be enslaved to anyone but Christ (Rom. 6:18; 16:18; Eph. 6:6). Nevertheless, he insisted as a general policy, "**don't let it trouble you.**"

One cannot help but wonder how the suggestion that slaves change their status if possible supports Paul's argument that each believer should remain in that situation in which he was called. One possibility is that Paul realized that God might change a believer's assignment by calling him to a new situation. The freeing of a slave might represent a new call. Another possible explanation is that Paul's real concern was that believers be content with their calls, and not try to best each other. Paul knew the Corinthians sought to outdo their fellow believers in status and spiritual things (1:11-12; 3:3-4,17-21; 4:6-10,18; 5:2,6; 6:6-8; 8:1-2; 11:16,17-22; 12:20-26; 14:37-38; 15:12,34). As a result, he may have instructed the Corinthians to keep their stations because he knew that they sought to change them for the wrongs reasons. Believers should not seek to remain single, or to refrain from sexual relationships with their spouses, or to be

circumcised, or to gain their freedom, or to do anything else if the reason they seek the change is to elevate themselves above others or to appear more spiritual. However, there are legitimate reasons to change one's situation. For example, freedom is objectively a better state than slavery, and marriage is better than falling into sin (7:9).

7:22. Paul went on to explain (**for**) why slaves should not be utterly despondent with their condition. Any believer who is a **slave is the Lord's freedman** (7:22). In a day when slavery was widespread throughout the Mediterranean world, Paul gave great comfort to those who were unable to become legally free. He pointed to their inner spiritual condition of freedom in Christ. The status of slave carries no dishonor, rather slaves are equal in Christ to those of higher social status in the church (compare Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:11). In fact, Paul raised the status of slaves by asserting that the believing **slave** ought to consider himself a **freedman**, and the **free man** ought to consider himself **Christ's slave**. In Christ, the tables are even. Every believer is both free man and slave.

7:23. Needless to say, it would have been difficult for a slave to accept Paul's viewpoint. So, Paul closed his discussion of slavery by repeating a doctrine he had already mentioned in 6:20: all believers have been **bought with a price** — the price of Christ's blood. Believers have been set free from sin's dominion through the death of Christ. This spiritual freedom came at the costly price of Christ's sacrificial death. Consequently, believers must **not become slaves of men**. Paul spoke metaphorically here. He did not want slaves within the church to accept the outlooks of those who would have enslaved them, tyrannizing them with false views that Christian slaves were not equals to Christian masters (Rom. 6:16; Gal. 5:1; Col. 2:20; Phlm. 16). Instead, he wanted them to think of themselves, whatever their condition, as free men and women because Christ had set them free at the cost of his own blood. As in 6:20, Paul also emphasized that Christ's purchase of the church meant that the church's new identity in Christ required different behavior on the part of believers, in this case contentedly maintaining their stations.

7:24. Affectionately calling the Corinthians "**brothers**" (see also 1:10,11,26; 2:1; 3:1; 4:6; 7:29; 10:1; 11:33; 12:1; 14:6,20,26,39; 15:1,31,50,58; 16:15), Paul here repeated the general rule of remaining in the station to which one is called. Yet, this time he added that Christians must live **as responsible to God** ("with God" NRSV, NASB). These additional words draw attention to the fact that one can know when to change his or her situation only if he or she consciously depends on God. No rule can cover all the circumstances involved in such decisions. The general policy is to stay in the condition to which God called one, but as people who are responsible to God himself, Christians must often change their conditions. Further, because God has assigned believers' stations, no particular merit attaches to any condition, regardless of the honor the world may bestow on one station above another. Believers therefore should find contentment in serving God wherever they have been called, and should not seek to change their stations in order raise their spiritual status above that of their fellows. In Christ, no station carries higher honor than another.

VIRGINS AND MARRIAGE (7:25-40)

Having illustrated his general policy about changing social conditions, Paul turned to another matter related to marriage: the specific question of whether or not virgins should marry. In effect, Paul applied the principle developed in the previous section. He told the unmarried not to feel pressured to change their stations to improve their status. Moreover, because of the crisis in Corinth, he encouraged them to remain unmarried unless God called them to do otherwise.

7:25-26. Verse 25 begins with the letter's second *peri de* (see also 7:1; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1,12), indicating that Paul here began to respond to a different question put to him by the Corinthians' letter. Should young Christians get married? The term "**virgins**" probably refers to virgin women who were engaged but not yet married (see 7:36). Apparently, there was a controversy in the Corinthian church over whether or not engaged couples should go through with their marriages. Paul began his discussion of this question by admitting that Jesus himself did not teach on the matter. Paul was familiar with Jesus' earthly ministry (11:23-25), and elsewhere insisted that he wrote **the command of the Lord** (14:37). Here, he knew that there was **no command from the Lord** because Jesus had not commented on this question. Quite possibly, Paul meant that the Corinthians' **present crisis** presented a unique problem which neither Jesus nor the Old Testament had addressed in particular. Even so, Paul did not suggest that his view as an apostle was any less authoritative. **By the Lord's mercy**, he was **trustworthy** to speak sound advice.

By qualifying his answer with the words "**I think**," Paul acknowledged that he offered a preference or opinion, not an absolute rule. The expression could be translated, "I prefer." In effect, Paul said that the rule of "remaining as you are" which he had just illustrated (7:17-24) should also be applied to those contemplating marriage. Remaining unmarried **is good** (7:26). These words must have sounded strange to the Corinthians who were familiar with the Old Testament. After all, God looked at Adam when he was alone and said, "It is not good for the man to be alone" (Gen. 2:18). Was Paul contradicting God's assessment of singleness and marriage in Genesis 2:18? Paul made it clear that his preference stemmed from the unique circumstances that the church, and perhaps only the Corinthian church, faced in his day. He said that the unmarried should remain unmarried **because of the present crisis** (7:26).

It is difficult to know for certain what Paul meant by "**the present crisis**." At least two understandings are feasible. First, Paul may have been pointing to the crisis associated with the return of Christ. In this passage he referred to the nearness of Christ's return (7:29,31). Although Paul did not speak of persecution in this manner anywhere else, Jesus did mention that this age would be a time for persecution of believers (Matt. 5:10-12; 10:23; 13:21; 23:3; Mark 4:17; 10:30; Luke 21:12; John 15:20). For this reason, many interpreters think Paul was saying that anyone who understands what the Christian age will be like will not want to be married.

Second, a more likely understanding is that Paul referred to famines in Greece that caused great trials for the people of Corinth. Paul mentioned that some of the Corinthian Christians were hungry as they came to the Lord's Supper (11:21,34). Historical research has demonstrated that famines were occurring in the land near this time (see commentary 16:1-4). In light of the hardships that these famines caused the church, Paul strongly suggested that unmarried people should remain unmarried. In support of this reading, it is also interesting to note that Paul nowhere suggested that virgins should never marry, or that this judgment was to be perpetual. In fact, in 7:36 he qualified his advice by suggesting that it might be better to marry fiancés who were getting on in years rather than to refrain from marriage. This suggests that Paul did not advise perpetual singleness, but rather a temporary moratorium on weddings. Presumably, when the crisis passed Paul would have advised marriage.

7:27. Paul expanded his advice regarding virgins by telling those bound to wives not to **seek a divorce**. Paul did not use the word "**married**" (NIV) here, but rather the phrase "bound to a woman/wife" (compare NASB and NRSV "bound to a wife"). In all likelihood, Paul had in mind those who were betrothed or promised in marriage. In ancient Israel betrothal was practically equivalent to marriage (see Deut. 22:23-24). Paul did not want betrothed parties to break off their engagements because of what he had said, but only to postpone them. Further, he did not want those who had been released from marital obligations to **look for a wife**. The NIV is somewhat misleading here in its reference to the "**unmarried**." As the NASB ("Are you released from a wife?") and NRSV ("Are you free from a wife?") reflect, the text literally speaks to those who have been released from women/wives. His main points were that those already engaged should not yet wed, and that those who had broken off their engagements should not yet seek to enter new marriage contracts. These things should wait until the crisis passed.

7:28. Paul knew the Scriptures teach that marriage is good (Gen. 2:18). The value of marriage does not disappear simply because difficult times come. So, he conceded that those who marry **have not sinned**. Though he thought marriage inadvisable because of the present crisis, he conceded that it was no sin. Yet, those choosing marriage were to do so with eyes wide open to the **troubles in this life** they would **face**. Though "in this life" is a common translation (NIV, NASB, NRSV), the KJV renders the phrase more literally as "in the flesh." The KJV translation should be preferred here since Paul does not mean that married life is always more difficult and troublesome than single life. After all, God ordained wives to be partners of their spouses, not hindrances (Gen. 2:18).

Rather, given the famines in the area, Paul probably meant that marriage would make it harder to put food on everyone's tables, which is especially understandable when one considers that marriage leads to children, and therefore to more mouths to feed. Such lack of food would truly be "trouble in the flesh." Paul encouraged caution to those who were unmarried because he wanted **to spare** them these troubles. His sensitivity to the practical needs of the Corinthians was evident, yet he was also plainly

aware that he needed to allow them to follow God's call in such matters on an individual basis (see 7:17-24,36).

THE IMPLICATIONS OF AN ETERNAL PERSPECTIVE (7:29-35)

Paul wanted the Corinthians to discard their worldly perspectives which emphasized personal spiritual status and which led to arrogance and divisions. He taught them to adopt instead an eternal perspective. He explained that such a perspective would quell their anxieties, and help them better understand his instructions to postpone marriage, thus implying that it would help them better weather their time of crisis.

7:29-31. Paul's address of the Corinthians as "**brothers**" (see also 1:10,11,26; 2:1; 3:1; 4:6; 7:24; 10:1; 11:33; 12:1; 14:6,20,26,39; 15:1,31,50,58; 16:15) reflected his deep concern for their well-being. His concern caused him to ponder momentarily the conditions of life faced by all believers, married, divorced, widowed, engaged, and happily single alike. His segue began and ended with acknowledgments that this life is fleeting: **time is short . . . this world in its present form is passing away**. Although life seems to go on endlessly, in reality it passes ever so quickly. People are but "mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes" (Jas. 4:14).

Between these opening and closing thoughts, the apostle reflected poetically on the nature of life in this fleeting time. His poetry followed the patterns of parallelism found in the poetry of the Old Testament. Because this material is poetic, it is not surprising to find that the apostle spoke in hyperbole. He mentioned several kinds of people: **those who have wives, those who mourn, those who are happy, those who buy something, and those who use the things of the world**. As in 5:1 and 7:2, "**those who have wives**" probably does not refer to the engaged virgins, but to those who maintain sexual relationships with their wives.

All of these activities are legitimate and honorable in Paul's view. They have in common, however, that they are all oriented toward the this earthly life, and Paul was concerned that believers not invest themselves too deeply in such matters. For this reason, he balanced each category of activity by encouraging a proper, eternal perspective. Christians **should live as if** they have no wives, no mourning, no happiness, no permanent possessions, and no engrossments. Paul's words should not be taken in an absolute sense. Elsewhere he clearly affirmed balanced views of marriage responsibilities and sexuality (1 Cor. 7:2-4,10-14; 9:5; Eph. 5:22-33; Col. 3:18-19), happiness (Rom. 12:12,15; 15:10; 16:19; 1 Cor. 12:26; 13:6; 2 Cor. 2:3; 6:10; 13:11; Phil 2:18; 3:1; 4:4; 1 Thess. 5:16), mourning (Rom. 9:2; 12:15; 1 Cor. 5:2; 12:26; 2 Cor. 2:3; 7:9-11; Phil. 3:18), and possessions (1 Cor. 13:3; Eph. 4:28; Phil. 4:16-18; 1 Tim. 6:8). In this passage, he merely reminded all Corinthians that these legitimate aspects of life were not everything.

Paul expressed his reason (**for**) for this attitude at the end of verse 31: the world to which these things belong is **passing away**. To handle matters of this life properly, Christians must remember that these things are not permanent (compare 13:8). Living for Christ in this age is a complex reality. On the one hand, believers live in this world with its pleasure, pain, and responsibilities. On the other hand, they belong to the next world which will replace this life forever. This is why Paul described his own life in paradoxical terms: dying but living, beaten but not killed, sorrowful but rejoicing, poor but making others rich, having nothing but owning everything (2 Cor. 6:9-10).

7:32. Paul continued to address all varieties of Corinthians by explaining that he gave the instructions in 7:29-31 in order to keep them from anxiety. He wanted them **to be free from concern**. The word here translated “free from concern” is *amerimnous*, which may have the positive meaning of “caring” or the negative meaning of “worrying or being anxious.” The same is true of its cognate verb *merimnao*, here translated “is concerned.” Given the fact that Paul said he want people to be *amerimnous*, “without caring/anxiety,” it seems best to understand the word to have a negative force in this passage. Traditionally, *amerimnous* has been taken to mean not simply “free from concern,” but “free from concern over worldly matters.” This reading probably arose because of the context of the immediately preceding verses (7:29-31). As a result, *merimnao* has been interpreted positively in reference to “the Lord’s affairs,” but negatively in reference to affairs of this world (7:33). Paul did not offer this qualification, however, and the word itself does not mean this. Moreover, people in every station of life, whether married or unmarried, are susceptible to concern and anxiety when they lose the eternal perspective, whether over the Lord’s or the world’s affairs.

As Paul specifically pointed out, even **an unmarried man** may worry over **the Lord’s affairs**. Elsewhere in this letter, Paul made it clear that the Corinthians possessed a warped theology that placed heavy emphasis on human merit (4:7). The Corinthians: lacked a proper understanding of what it meant to be “in Christ” (1:12-13,30; 15:18-22); apparently thought their spiritual gifts were meritorious and status-worthy to some degree (12:1-31); and strove for spiritual status through their own efforts and associations (1:27-31; 3:21; 5:6). It would have been very easy for people who had this perspective instead of Paul’s eternal perspective to worry over God’s favor. Because pleasing God depended on their own works in their eyes, they had good reason to worry that they would fail to please him.

7:33-34a. **A married man** without an eternal perspective, on the other hand, has even more trouble than an unmarried man because he must worry about pleasing not only the Lord, but also **his wife**. To fulfill their moral responsibilities, married men must pay attention to all kinds of things that may distract them from their efforts to please the Lord. The **affairs of this world** crowd their lives and their **interests are divided** (7:32,34). If they lack an eternal perspective, they worry about pleasing God and about very real problems like putting food on the table even in times of famine. This in no way implies that marital responsibilities are evil. Paul affirmed the morality of faithfully fulfilling these responsibilities (see 7:1-6,29-31). He was concerned, however, that

believers, especially in times of severe trouble (see 7:26,28), maintain an eternal perspective so that they might not be anxious.

7:34b. Similarly, **an unmarried woman or virgin** (engaged woman) who lacks an eternal perspective may worry that her efforts to please **the Lord** will fail, or will not be enough to satisfy his holiness. It is the duty of unmarried women to refrain from fornication, **to be devoted to the Lord in body** as well as in **spirit**. This was probably hard to do in the sexually loose world of Corinth, particularly for those who had once been part of the promiscuous crowd (6:9-11). Keeping sexually pure was certainly as stressful as it was difficult, especially for those who thought their acceptability before God depended upon it. While a married woman had an outlet for her sexual drives, she also had the added worries of nurturing a relationship with **her husband** and of fulfilling her household responsibilities.

7:35. Paul did **not** encourage the postponement of marriage or the adoption of an eternal perspective in order **to restrict** the Corinthians' behavior. He did not intend them to interpret 7:29-31 as instructions against conjugal relations, mourning, happiness, or participation in the marketplace or in life. Given the Corinthians' propensity to twist Paul's words (compare 5:10), Paul was probably wise to make this point explicitly. Paul knew that postponing marriage and adopting an eternal perspective would benefit the Corinthians by helping them **live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord**. Though the NIV uses the word **devotion** here and the word **devoted** in verse 34, this is somewhat misleading since the Greek words *euparedron* ("devotion" [NIV]) and *hagios* ("devoted" [NIV]) are completely unrelated. Paul certainly did not mean to say that postponing marriage would help engaged virgins refrain from fornication. In fact, he apparently intended *euparedron* ("devotion" [NIV]) to refer to men and women, whether married or unmarried. The devotion of which he spoke was most likely the eternal perspective he encouraged and the willingness to alter behavior on the basis of that new perspective, such as by postponing marriage. By extension, it might also have implied the Christian behavior to which he encouraged them throughout the letter.

FINAL CONCESSIONS (7:36-40)

Paul intended to help the Corinthians live in proper devotion to the Lord, not to restrict them by giving them new rules to follow legalistically, and not to give them a new way to measure themselves against one another. To make sure that the Corinthians understood this, he offered two final concessions regarding marriage between those who were already engaged (7:36-38) and those who had been widowed (7:39-40).

7:36. As he had on several occasions in this passage, Paul acknowledged that better is not necessarily the only right choice. Paul advised singleness over marriage for the time of the present crisis, but the fact that God ordained marriage (Gen. 2:18)

meant that its legitimacy could never be denied. So, Paul once again qualified his advice with concessions, suggesting that the marriage of engaged women who were **getting along in years** not be postponed. Paul's "**anyone**" is somewhat ambiguous here. It may refer either to a young woman's fiancé or to her father. The NIV and NRSV understand fiancé, and are most likely correct given that 7:25-28 lay the responsibility for keeping or breaking engagement on the groom. Whether Paul referred to fathers, fiancés, or both, however, the basic idea is the same. If someone is convinced that marriage is right before God, **he should do as he wants. He is not sinning.**

7:37-38. At the same time, the man who has decided **not to marry the virgin... also does the right thing.** Paul further qualified his instructions by stating that refraining from marriage is right only if the decision is **settled** in the man's **own mind.** Paul found this qualification so important that he rephrased it several times. There must be **no compulsion.** The person must have **control over his own will,** and must have **made up his mind not to marry.** Apparently, there were some members of the Corinthian church who sought to control others in these matters, perhaps by pressuring them to pursue the "highest" spiritual status. Paul both knew the error of such concepts of status, and refused to let Christians dominate and abuse their brothers' and sisters' freedom of conscience (compare 8:8-13). Paul had expressed rather strong personal feelings about postponing marriage. Yet, he knew each individual had to settle this issue himself.

Many aspects of Christian living are of this nature. Advice may be given, but in the end each Christian must make a decision in good conscience before God. For this reason, Paul closed his discussion of this matter on a conciliatory note. Those who marry do **right,** and those who do not marry do **even better** (7:38). Both options are acceptable.

7:39-40. In 7:8 Paul had mentioned **the unmarried and the widows** and advised that it was **good for them to stay unmarried.** To this point, he had focused attention on questions related to those who had not been married. In these verses Paul briefly turned to matters more directly concerning widows. He began with the well-known policy that marriage bonds continue throughout life, but only until the death of a spouse. Similar language appears in Romans 7:2 where Paul used marriage as an analogy for the endurance of covenant and law. Paul went on to say that, upon the death of her husband, a widow **is free to marry.** In much the same way, Paul told Timothy that he wanted young widows to remarry (1 Tim. 5:14). The only qualification he offered was that the new husband must **belong to the Lord.** Later, Paul reiterated that Christians should be bound only to other Christians (2 Cor. 6:14). He did not want believers to divorce unbelievers to whom they were already married (7:12-13), but he also did not want believers knowingly to marry unbelievers.

As he had done a number of times in this chapter, Paul allowed marriage, but clearly made known his own **judgment** or opinion that a widow will be **happier if she stays as she is,** i.e. unmarried. Presumably, his reasons were the same as those

stated earlier for virgins: the present crisis (7:26). Clearly this was occasional advice tailored to Corinth's peculiar situation — Paul did not give contradictory advice to the Corinthians and to Timothy (1 Tim. 5:14). Because his opinion may have sounded contrary to general biblical principles favoring marriage, Paul wanted to make sure that no one too quickly dismissed his opinion. Thus, he reminded the Corinthians that he also had **the Spirit of God**. In this passage Paul did not command the Corinthians authoritatively as he did on other matters (e.g. 14:37), but these final words appealed to the Corinthians to take Paul's opinions very seriously.

DIGGING DEEPER

A. Unmarried (7:8,11,32,34)

The word translated “unmarried” (*agamos*) appears in the New Testament only in 1 Corinthians 7. Traditionally, it has been understood as a generic term referring to anyone not currently married. This would include single men and women, widowed men and women, and divorced men and women. Others, however, have suggested that *agamos* probably does not include people who have never been married, but only unmarried people who used to be married. The suggestion has also been made that *agamos* was not only a generic term for formerly married people, but also the typical word used in the New Testament period for “widower.”

B. Virgin(s) (7:25,28,34,36,37,38)

Most likely, the term *parthenos* applied not only virgins, whether male or female, but also to engaged women. Thus, the NRSV translates “fiancée” in 7:36,37,38. The NRSV is almost certainly correct in its assessment of these verses. The groom, not the bride's father, appears to have had control over whether or not he married in 7:27-28, though this does not preclude the possibility that the groom, the bride, and the bride's father all needed to agree. The moral responsibility for marriage also falls on the bride (**she has not sinned** [7:28]), but nowhere is there explicit mention that the bride's father has not sinned, or even takes part in the decision process. This context favors the reading that the groom, not the bride's father, is the subject of 7:36-38, and therefore that *parthenos* here means “fiancée.”

C. Divorce (7:27)

The marriage contract between a groom and a bride was considered so binding that to break that contract was considered divorce. Matthew's gospel illustrates this well in that Joseph, who had not yet married Mary, sought “**to divorce her**” (Matt. 1:19). Moreover, the context of 7:25-28 deals with virgins (**now about virgins** [7:25]), so it seems much better to understand 7:27 also to apply to female virgins and their male counterparts. Thus, “**divorce**” here refers to the breaking of the marriage contract prior to the consummation of the marriage. For other biblical teachings on divorce, see Malachi 2:16; Matthew 5:32; 19:3-12; Mark 10:2-12; Luke 16:18; 1 Corinthians 7:10-16.

Issues for Discussion

1. What were the circumstances in Corinth at the time Paul wrote? Why are those circumstances so important to understanding almost everything he wrote in this chapter?
2. Why should married couples maintain a sexual relationship? Why or why not? Are there exceptions to this?
3. What “gift” did Paul say that he had and wished everyone had? Does this imply that the opposite condition is also a gift? How does a gift differ from other conditions or qualities? What does this imply?
4. Why is it better to marry than to burn with passion?
5. When is divorce acceptable? Under what conditions is remarriage acceptable for divorced people? Under what conditions is remarriage acceptable for widows?
6. Does your church have a particular doctrinal position on who may and may not marry or remarry? If so, what is it? Do you agree with your church’s position? Why or why not?
7. Why did Paul tell the Corinthians to retain the places in life that the Lord had assigned to them? Should this exhortation be applied to modern Christians? If so, how?
8. Why did Paul think it was better for the Corinthians to remain single (or widowed) rather than to marry? Was this his perpetual opinion, or was this advice subject to change?
9. How can modern Christians apply Paul’s advice regarding abstention from marriage? Have you ever heard modern Christians advise against marriage on the grounds that it is an objectively worse state than singleness or widowhood? How do you feel about this advice?
10. What “time” did Paul say was “short”? How can a married person rightly live as if he or she were not married? How can one mourn, but also be “as if” one did not mourn?
11. What does it mean to be free from concern? Is concern a good thing or a bad thing? Explain your answer.
12. Did Paul’s statement that he was teaching his own opinion, relying on his own judgment, make this teaching optional? Why or why not? How does knowing that this is his opinion and judgment affect the way you interpret the chapter?

13. Why did Paul decide to teach the Corinthians about marriage, divorce, widowhood, singleness, remarriage, engagement, etc?
14. How do your own experiences being single, engaged, married, widowed, divorced, and/or remarried affect the way you interpret this chapter?
15. How does the material in this chapter relate to the material immediately before it and after it in the letter? Why do you think Paul chose to talk about these issues at this particular point in the letter?