

## 1 Corinthians 7: Marriage and Singleness in the Lord.

As we've been discussing, morality was very confused in Corinth. So, it was hard for people, new and growing Christians, to fathom the rights and wrongs of marriage. Was singleness better? Was celibacy a superior spiritual state? Or was marriage holier? That is what many of the rabbis taught. They believed marriage was an absolute requirement. The Talmud says (Yevamot 63a), "Any Jew who is unmarried is not a [whole] man". The Corinthians were confused, so Paul is going to clear this up for them – and us.

- I. 7:1-9 Sexual relations are proper – within the context of marriage.
- II. 7:10-16 God's best is for married people to stay married.
- III. 7:17-24 We should each be content with our present circumstances.
- IV. 7:25-40 Singleness can have its benefits in Christ.

**Marriage and singleness both have a place in the plan of God; both take contentment and obedience.**

- I. 7:1-9 Sexual relations are proper – within the context of marriage.
  - A. In the Greek world faithful monogamy was the ideal, but was by no means the norm.  
*"Mistresses we keep for pleasure, concubines for daily attendance upon our person, wives to bear us legitimate children; and be our faithful housekeepers." (Demosthenes, Oration Against Nemra)*
  - B. 7:1 The Corinthians wrote Paul about this. His answer: It's OK to stay single.
  - C. 7:2 But marriage is a God-given shelter for us in an immoral environment like Corinth – or perhaps the USA – where intimate relationships tend to be far too fluid.
  - D. 7:3-5 Sexual relations are good and needful within in marriage. **Do not deprive one another** unless you both agree to abstain for a time, but do so only temporarily.
  - E. 7:6-9 Paul was single and indicates a personal preference for singleness.
- Some of us have been brought up to think that one state is somehow spiritually superior to the other. Some are raised in an environment that says celibacy is a holier status than marriage – especially the sexual part. Others elevate marriage and, perhaps unintentionally, make single people feel like second class believers. Paul places both at the same level, saying that different people are called to different things. **Each one has his own gift from God (v.7)**. Consider your marital status a gift.

*By all means marry. If you get a good wife you will become happy, and if you get a bad one you will become a philosopher. (Socrates)*

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II. 7:10-16 God's best is for married people to stay married.

A. 7:10-11 This teaching comes straight from Jesus – as Paul says.

**Matt 19:3-6 NKJV** <sup>3</sup>The Pharisees also came to Him, testing Him, and saying to Him, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for just any reason?"

<sup>4</sup>And He answered and said to them, "Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning 'made them male and female,' <sup>5</sup>and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? <sup>6</sup>So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate."

- i. So Rule #1 is: Once you are married God's will is for you to stay married. That's why our vows include words like "as long as we both shall live." "For the LORD God of Israel says that He hates divorce." (Mal 2:16) Of course He still loves divorced people – it's only the concept or activity of divorce that He hates.
  - ii. Jesus acknowledges, also in Matt 19 that divorce is permitted in the case of immorality or infidelity. But again, that's permitted not required.
  - iii. Reconciliation would still be the ideal. Example: Mike & Sandy MacIntosh, divorced BC, but remarried as believers. Also Ms Donna from our preschool, separated for several years from her husband as Christians, they maintained a friendly relationship. They never divorced and later were again fully reconciled.
- B. 7:12-16 Jesus, however, did not address everything. The rule in the case of an unbeliever married to a believer is that they are to stay married as long as the unbeliever is OK with the marriage. This will be best for everyone, kids included.
- i. If you are married to a non-Christian, you shouldn't assume that the unbelieving spouse is holding you back from greater service to Jesus. Rather, assume that God has called you to serve your unbelieving spouse.
  - ii. But v.15 points out that if the unbeliever doesn't want the marriage, it can be more peaceful to grant that unbeliever a divorce.
    - The background for that is that you are trying to be the best Christian husband or wife that you possibly can be. You don't beat the unbeliever with a Bible until they finally leave you. This means that the non-Christian spouse decides he or she doesn't want the marriage despite all your best efforts to keep it.

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III. 7:17-24 We should each be content with our present circumstances.

A. Contentment is a challenging topic – and it impacts more than just marriage.

- i. 7:17-19 There were Gentile converts in those days getting circumcised because they thought it would be more biblical. There are also records from the intertestamental period of Jews de-circumcising themselves so that they would appear to be Greek (e.g., 1 Macc. 1:15; Josephus *Antiquities*, 12.5.1.).
- ii. 7:20-24 Even if someone were a slave (and this was about half of all people in the Roman Empire) they should do their best to be content. Let's emphasize, however, that Paul does not recommend slavery here, he simply didn't endorse what would have amounted to social revolution:
  1. In v.21 he says to go ahead and get free if you can.
  2. In v. 23 he clearly says not to become a slave.
  3. As Christians (v.22) we are reminded that we were bought at a price by Jesus. He freed us from the bondage of sin and death by His blood.

*First Peter 1:17-19 NKJV* <sup>17</sup>And if you call on the Father, who without partiality judges according to each one's work, conduct yourselves throughout the time of your stay here in fear; <sup>18</sup>knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers, <sup>19</sup>but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot.

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IV. 7:25-40 Singleness can have its benefits in Christ.

- A. 7:25 Jesus didn't give any specific commandment about virgins (parthénos, like the "Parthenon"), but apparently the Corinthians had asked about this.
- B. 7:26 The **present distress** may refer the persecutions which Paul already saw coming.
- C. 7:27-28 Again, Paul emphasizes contentment. Both singleness and marriage are good in their own way. Singleness has specific troubles, but so does marriage.

*The difficulty with marriage is that we fall in love with a personality, but must live with a character. (Peter De Vries, American novelist 1910-1993)*

*Keep your eyes wide open before marriage, and half-shut afterwards. (Benjamin Franklin)*

- D. 7:29-31 Live as if this world were not your home, because it isn't. This world is passing away. Whatever our present situation is, it's important that we don't hold onto it too tightly. We should never lose sight of our destiny. **The time is short (v.29)**. Jesus is coming soon. Always live with that in mind.

**1Jn 2:15-17 NKJV** <sup>15</sup>Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. <sup>16</sup>For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world. <sup>17</sup>And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever.

E. 7:32-35 Singleness gives more opportunity for service – if the single person uses it that way. Of course, this doesn't happen automatically. It must be intentional.

- Married people should rightly prioritize their marriage before their ministry if a serious conflict ever begins to develop. That way your ministry will grow out of a strong marriage rather than your marriage being weakened by your ministry. When a marriage is weakened by ministry something is very wrong.

*Let the wife make the husband glad to come home, and let him make her sorry to see him leave. (Martin Luther – and He said that in the days when wives all stayed home.)*

F. 7:36-38 There is some debate among the experts as to what Paul means here. He might be talking about an engaged man marrying his fiancée – because marriages were often arranged. Or he could be speaking of fathers giving their daughters away.

- Either way, this agrees with the rest of the chapter: Marriage is a good. Paul has a personal preference for singleness – not because it is inherently more spiritual, but because it allows greater opportunity for service.

G. 7:39-40 Widows, too, are free to remarry **in the Lord**. If they get remarried, they should be sure to marry another Christian.

## Conclusions:

### **Marriage and singleness are both perfectly acceptable states in God's eyes.**

There are many good reasons for not marrying; one is to have more time to work for God's kingdom. Don't assume that God wants everyone to marry. For many it may be better not to.

If you really want to get married, be sure that you prayerfully seek God's will before you plunge into the lifelong commitment of marriage. As in the ancient world, divorce is again very common, but it is not what God originally intended. Couples should decide against divorce from the start and build their marriage on mutual commitment.

And if you are looking for that right person, decide now to be the best husband or wife imaginable – rather than looking for someone to fulfill your own needs.

### **Both marriage and singleness can be gifts from God.**

One is not morally better than the other, and both can be valuable depending on God's plan. It is important for us, therefore, to accept our present situation. When Paul said he wished that all people were like him (unmarried), he was only saying that he wished more people would devote themselves completely to the ministry without the added concerns of spouse and family, as he had done.

Still, he was not criticizing marriage. If you are married you need to take your marriage seriously and remember that it is God's will that you make your marriage the best it can possibly be.