

1 Corinthians 7 (Part 1): 1-16, 32-35 • Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage

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Verse 1, 1 Corinthians 7.

“Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: “It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.”² But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband.³ The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband.⁴ For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does.⁵ Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.

⁶ Now as a concession, not a command, I say this.⁷ I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another.

⁸ To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single, as I am.⁹ But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion.

¹⁰ To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband¹¹ (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife.

¹² To the rest I say (I, not the Lord) that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her.¹³ If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him.¹⁴ For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.¹⁵ But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace.¹⁶ For how do you know,

wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?" (ESV)

I'm going to have you stop there. Let's pray.

Lord, we come to You. Holy Spirit, speak to us. Impart understanding, wisdom, and insight. We need it, Lord to help us really grasp a hold of what You're saying here and how to apply it to our lives. We ask these things in Jesus name, amen.

There is so much in this chapter that I felt that trying to take the whole chapter all in one week would just do a disservice to it. And so, you'll notice that here, this is the what we would call a modern Q&A.

Paul has received questions from the church in Corinth, and now he begins to speak to those questions and they center around the issue as you saw, as we read through there of marriage and divorce and even remarriage.

And he begins by saying, *"Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: (then he goes on to say) "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.""*

Now, right away, you're probably taking a little bit of back at that statement and you're like huh? What is that? What exactly is the apostle Paul saying here?

Well, if you're reading the ESV this morning, like I am, you'll notice that statement is in quotation marks. Look in your Bible, if you have an ESV. Now, it doesn't have quotations in all the translations, but the ESV translators put it in quotations. That statement, *"It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman."* Because they believe that Paul is actually quoting a statement made by the Corinthians. In other words, he's quoting what they said as part of a statement or question that they were posing to him.

And personally, I believe that is what is happening here because during the rest of the chapter, Paul is basically going to moderate this rather harsh statement. It's a fairly reactive statement and you need to understand why the Corinthians would make such a reactive statement.

They lived in Corinth. Corinth was, we've talked about this. Crazy from a sexual standpoint. I mean Corinth made Las Vegas look like Mayberry. This place was rampant with sexual activity, sexual immorality. There were prostitutes, there were a thousand prostitutes that attended one temple there in Corinth, who

would roam the streets. And there was all kinds of other lascivious, promiscuity, and sexual stuff going on within Corinth. It was a crazy place to live.

And I believe that what is being said here is a reaction by some of the Corinthians who really want Paul on their side. And they're basically reacting to all this. Rampant sexuality by saying in essence, well, we just need to stop the whole thing. We just need to say, listen, let's just, it's good for a man simply not to have sexual relations with a woman, which is a pretty harsh reactive statement. Wouldn't you agree? Do you know the people that do that sort of thing that are reactive by nature? Do you know some of the..., some of you guys are going...

But there are some people who are a little more laid back, and when something happens around them, they go, well, let's think this thing through, let's talk about it, let's see what we've got going on here. And there's other people that just go, wow! It's like the old knee jerk reaction. The doctor hits that little place in the knee and boom, look out, it's coming and that's what's happening.

There's this reaction by some of the Corinthians to say, listen, the only way we're going to get a handle on this sexual immorality that is just rampant around here is if we as Christians live a completely different lifestyle. And that means we're just going to abstain altogether. We're just going to live this celibate sort of a, crawl into a hole, and we're not going to be involved in this sort of activity at all.

Well, that's, it's frankly not realistic, and Paul is going to spend the rest of this chapter moderating that harsh statement that is made here by the Corinthians. And you'll notice that he begins to do that right away in verse 2, where he says, *“But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband.”*

See, this is, Paul believed in the God ordained institution of marriage. Not just as a means of companionship and procreation, but also as a means to maintain a morality among men and women. And so that they don't, aren't constantly giving into the sexual immorality and the lasciviousness of the culture. God created marriage as part in parcel to minister to couples essentially in that area.

And he goes on in verse 3 to say that, *“The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband.”* You see what he's doing? He's moderating the original statement that they came out with, the original reaction. Well, we should just all be celibate. That's the only way we're ever going to be different from the culture in which we live here in Corinth.

And so Paul says, no, there's this institution of marriage and within the context of marriage, a man should give his wife her conjugal rights and likewise the wife to her husband.

And he explains why in verse 4, *“For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does.”* That's an interesting statement.

In other words, when a man and a woman enter into the marriage union, they are surrendering their personal right to their physical body and giving that right to the one to whom they are marrying. This is a beautiful picture actually.

This is a statement of what it means to be one flesh. The Bible calls marriage a one flesh union and marriage is the only relationship on earth that is called one flesh. And it is a total giving and sharing of one's life, and all that we have to this person to whom we are married. It is not withholding anything. It is giving of everything. That is what marriage is meant to be.

I talk about this in both marriage and pre-marriage counseling before people get married. I talk about how this is what I call, total intimacy. It's giving of all that I am to my spouse, and it really is truly a beautiful picture.

In fact, Paul lays this out as we read on in verse 5 as a very precious privilege and even a responsibility. He says, *“Do not deprive one another, (of this, obviously speaking of this, these conjugal marital right) except perhaps by agreement (and just) for a limited time, (he says) that you may devote yourselves to prayer;”*

He's saying here that it is completely appropriate for a couple within the context of intercession to agree together that we're going to abstain for a period of time from marital activity so that we might focus ourselves in prayer. Nothing wrong with that at all. But notice Paul says it needs to be done in agreement with one another. This is not some unilateral decision on your part, you married people. To simply withhold yourself using a religious excuse to your spouse saying, I'm fasting from this, and I'm fasting from intimacy during this time.

Paul says no, let it be because of agreement as you agree together couples should say, hey, listen, we're going to have this period of time where we're going to devote ourselves to prayer, devote ourselves to focusing on God. And even intimacy can be one of those things that we can fast, and lay before the Lord, and abstain for that period of focused intercession.

Now, notice here too, that the apostle urges the couple to not spend a long time doing this sort of a thing, but to break that fast after a period and then come back together again so that they might not play into the hands of Satan as it relates to the temptation. He says, *“but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.”*

Now, let me quickly add here is somewhat of a side point that these verses about not depriving one another of marital rights within the context of marriage, these are never to be used as leverage to cajole or manipulate a marriage partner. If a marriage partner is saying to their spouse, hey, 1 Corinthians chapter 7, verse 5, and doing that, then you got problems. I mean, things need to be talked through.

If you're having to use this scripture passage as a crowbar to open something that is otherwise shut, then you got some deeper issues to resolve, and I would suggest that you do that. This passage was never meant to be your spiritual baseball bat to beat over a spouse's head, to selfishly get what you want to get at that moment out of the relationship.

Ultimately, the blessings of marriage and the sharing of intimacy between a husband and wife is always to be something that is given freely, joyfully within the context of marriage. And if it cannot be given freely and joyfully, then you got some things to deal with. You got some things to resolve and I would encourage you to do that, however you go about it. But again, they are not meant, these verses are not meant to reduce your spouse to the act, to a place of servile obedience to you.

Paul goes on to say, look at verse 6 in your Bible. He says, *“Now as a concession, not a command, I say this. ⁷I wish that all were as I myself am.”* And what Paul is saying is, I'm single, I'm unattached. And he says, as a concession, I say, I wish that you were as I am.

And he says, *“But each has his own gift from God, ...”* Rather than responding to the harsh statement that the Corinthians said, we should just abstain from sexual activity completely, he comes back and he says, listen, as a concession, and I'm not going to stand with you people who want me to make a command out of this thing. To say no, we're all going to be celibate. I'm not going to do that. But as a concession, I say to you, if you are single, it's probably best you stay that way. Now, why would he say such a thing?

Why would Paul say that singleness is preferred over marriage? He's not dissing marriage at all. You have to understand that everything the apostle Paul says is

predicated on ministry. This man, he has given his life to the ministry, and so when he talks about marriage or money or relationships of any kind, he is talking about it from the context of ministry. And so concerning ministry, he says, there is an advantage to being single. What is the advantage of being single in the ministry? Well, he actually talks about it later on in this chapter.

We're going to pick up a few verses. Skip down to verse 32 in your Bible, would you please? 32. Same chapter. He says, *"I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord. ³³ But the married man (well, he) is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife, ³⁴ and his interests (he says) are divided. And the unmarried or betrothed woman (same thing, she can be completely focused) is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit. But the married woman is anxious about worldly things, (such as) how to please her husband.*

³⁵ I say this for your own benefit, (look at this) not to lay any restraint upon you, ..." That's what the Corinthians were trying to do, they were trying to lay restraint, that sort of thing. The one we read in verse 1. So he says, *"but to promote good order and to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord."*

Again, the reason that Paul believes that singleness is preferred over marriage is because of the advantageous way that a single person can serve the Lord and give themselves to focus everything on the kingdom of God, and on the ministry of the Word, and that sort of thing. A married person can't do that.

I can't do that. I've been married for almost 38 years and for the time that I've been walking with the Lord, I've had a divided attention. It just goes with the territory. I married a woman, and she's a focus of my life, and she has to be. There's nothing wrong with it.

Paul says, hey, when you're married, you have a natural focus that you have to tend to. When you're single, you don't have that responsibility and you can give all of your attention and your focus to the Lord. Again, a married person can't do that.

But there's something else that some people can't do. Some people can't stay single. They just can't. I want you to look with me again at verse 7. We're going to read this whole verse again. He says, *"I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own gift from God, (did you catch that?) one of one kind and one of another."*

What Paul is saying here is, I wish you could be single, but not everybody has the gift. The gift. Yeah, singleness can be a gift. A gift from the Lord. Not everybody has that gift. In fact, I would say very few people have that gift. I certainly don't have that gift. But, some do as a gift from God.

And I'll be honest with you, in all my years in the ministry, I could probably only remember a handful of people that I know who actually have the gift of singleness. I mean, obviously I've met many, many single people, but that doesn't mean they have the gift of staying single.

They just happen to be single and they're desiring to move toward marriage, but at this particular juncture, they're single. But I have met a few rare individuals who have absolutely no desire to marry and they are unmarried, and it is a gift from God. There's a contentment in their hearts about it.

How do you know if you have the gift of singleness? Simple. It's simple. First of all, you have no desire to marry. It's not that burning gravitational pull in your life to be married. Alright. But listen here, before we go any further, when I say you don't have a desire to be married, I'm not talking about the person who doesn't want to get married, so instead they're just going to live with somebody outside of wedlock. That's not what we're talking about here because there are plenty of people that are living together with someone because they have no desire to get married. No, that's not it.

We're talking about somebody who has no desire to be married, and there is something else present in their life, that is self-control. There is a self-control that is going on in their life that keeps them free from that draw of sexual activity and it has to be there. That self-control has to be there or your singleness isn't going to work. Bottom line, okay? Paul actually talks about it in verse 8. Look with me there in your Bible.

He says, *“To the unmarried and the widows (meaning those who, obviously, women who lost their husbands to death) I say that it is good for them to remain single, as I am. ⁹ But if they cannot exercise self-control, (right, in other words, if the self-control to restrain themselves from the draw of sexual activity isn't there, then obviously they don't have the gift of singleness, he goes on to say, then) they should marry. (they should get married and there's nothing wrong with them getting married, right? And then he says,) For it is better to marry than to burn with passion.”*

This is a very wise principle. Again, Paul recommended singleness for the purpose of a greater focused service to the Lord, but he also acknowledged if

the gift isn't there, and self-control isn't present, it's better to marry than to fall into sin. Right? Very important thing. And boy, there's a lot of other dynamics I could bring up about this but I don't really have time to do so.

Now, Paul goes on here in this latter part of the section that we're going to be looking at, and he goes on to address those who are married. So those of you who are married, this is for you. Let me just remind you that this is a letter written to Christians. Okay? This letter did not appear in the Corinthian Chronicles in the Dear Abby section. This came to the church. This is for believers.

Here's what he says. *“¹⁰ To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband ¹¹ (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife.”*

Now, let me explain something here quickly. The reason that Paul says here, in this verse, that this command is not from him, but is from the Lord, is because he's quoting a previous revelation from God's Word. This goes back all the way to the beginning from Genesis chapter 2, when the very first wedding ceremony took place, right. When God brought the bride right to the groom, I'm talking about Eve and Adam and they became one flesh. And that passage in Genesis chapter 2 ends with these words, therefore what God has joined together Right? Let man not separate. It's been around for a long time.

Paul says, this is from the Lord. This is something that He has previously revealed. And then he begins to say to the married, right? The wife should not separate from her husband, the husband should not separate from his wife. If the wife does separate, she must either remain unmarried, or else be reconciled.

Now, Paul reminds us here that basically divorce is not part of God's plan for married couples, it never was. But he acknowledges in this verse that there are times when a marriage is simply impossible to maintain due to the disobedience of one of the partners in the marriage relationship.

Some sinful ungodly attitude, or behavior, or whatever. And in such cases, he writes. That if, in verse 11, that if a woman simply cannot remain in the marriage relationship because it is impossible to do so. And sometimes it is impossible to do so because either the woman has been threatened with her very life, or the children's lives, or safety is being threatened. There are situations that do come up where a woman just has to leave. She has to get out of there for her safety.

I have seen situations where men had to get out for their safety. I have personally helped women over the years to move out, and it's never fun. And it's never something I ever, I brag about or something like that. It's horrible.

When the situation is so bad that they just can't even, they can't even live together anymore. They can't even be in the same location. I've even helped one man over the years. One man who was literally in danger of losing his health and even more if he didn't get out of that situation. And you always hope that there's going to be some place for reconciliation in there somewhere. But there are times where it just, there has to be a separation.

And Paul says here, if it is absolutely necessary, and the woman chooses to leave her husband, because often it is the man who makes life impossible, he says that the woman should either remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband.

And the reason Paul adds this clause, that she should either remain unmarried or, if possible, be reconciled is because he is trying to discourage separation and divorce simply for the option of remarriage.

In other words, God takes a very dim view of divorces of convenience. You guys know what a divorce of convenience is, basically, right? It means I'm married to this woman but then after a period of time, I fell in love with this woman, and so I'm going to divorce this woman, so now I can marry this woman. That's a divorce of convenience. And I can come up with all kinds of excuses, some states I don't even have to.

But regardless of that, if I'm a believer, I can even try to justify it by certain things. But in the end, it's just a divorce of convenience. I just simply fell in love with somebody else and I'm going to divorce the first one to marry the second one.

And basically Paul says here, you made a lifelong commitment on your wedding day, so, if circumstances are beyond your control, and those circumstances have made it impossible for you to stay within that marriage, fine. If a separation is needed for safety or for peace, fine. But divorce simply for the sake of remarriage is patently wrong, and should not be done.

And then these final verses, verse 12, look with me there. "*To the rest I say (I, not the Lord)...*" Now let me stop and explain this. Now what is Paul saying? Because he's reversed it.

He says, to the rest I'm saying, and this is me, not the Lord. What is he saying here? He's saying that this is something that does not have a prior command found in the Word of God. But please don't think that what Paul is about to do is just give you his personal opinion that you can either take or not take, depending on whether you happen to like it.

You have to remember something. We believe that what Paul and the other biblical writers wrote down was inspired of the Lord. It's literally God breathed. And that alone means that what Paul writes here in these pages has an authority that goes along with it. Even though Paul is saying there's no previous command or revelation related to what I'm about to say to you, we still believe he is operating through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and the authority of God's Word is upon the things that he is about to write.

And what he says here in verse 12, “...*if any brother has a wife* (now brother means Christian, okay? So if any brother in the Lord, you could say, *has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her.* ¹³ *If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him.* (why?)

¹⁴ *For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.*”

Paul says here that if a believer in Christ is married to an unbeliever, and the unbeliever wishes to remain in the marriage union, that the believing spouse should not initiate any a divorce simply because the person to whom they are married is an unbeliever.

Now, you might say, well, why in the world would someone do that? Well, Christianity was a pretty radical thing back, then we've been around, Christianity has been around for a long time and there are frankly a lot of couples, many couples today, where you've got one believer and one unbeliever in the family, happens a lot.

But this was a huge departure from the norm. It was, it would be very much like today, if a couple, a Muslim couple that were very much into Islam as their religion. If one of those people in that marriage union came to Christ, received Jesus as their Savior and opened their heart to the gospel and became a born again Christian. That would be huge, and in some cases, it would be enough to end the marriage. Right there. If one of the people came to Christ. And in early Christianity, this same thing was happening.

People were coming to Jesus and sometimes their spouse didn't. Their spouse resisted, or whatever the case might be. And so they, there are questions about this. What do you do in this sort of a situation? I'm a believer, my spouse isn't a believer, and so forth. And Paul says, listen, if the unbeliever wants to stay married, then the believer in the marriage should remain married and not seek a divorce.

And one of the reasons you'll notice that he cites here is a very mysterious sort of passage. Where he talks about the fact that within the union of the marriage covenant, there is a special grace that attends the unbelieving spouse. And frankly, this is something we don't understand very well. Just suffice it to say, when a believer is married to an unbeliever, the person who does not believe has some sort of special grace in God.

But I need to caution you, this does not mean that the unbeliever in the relationship is saved or isn't even necessarily going to be saved. What the grace is that has them set apart through this one flesh union is wonderful, and mysterious, and glorious, but we really don't fully understand it. And so for me to go out on a limb and try to explain it to you would be, unwise of me because we really don't have a lot of biblical understanding related to this.

At the very least the unbeliever is regularly coming into contact with the gospel through their believing spouse, but beyond that we're not sure what he's saying. But there is no guarantee when you're married to an unbeliever. If some of you Single girls have ever thought to yourself, well, it doesn't matter if I marry an unbeliever, I'll just bring him to the Lord. You don't know that. You don't know if you will.

In fact, that's what Paul goes on to say here. Look at verse 16. Actually, you know what? Let me do verse 15 first. I don't want to skip over that. First of all, he says, “...*if the unbelieving partner separates*, (and that means they decide, I don't want any part of this marriage because this, my spouse is a believer, he says) *let it be so*. (in other words, let them go) *In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved.*”

It's a little bit of a clumsy word used there by the ESV. It means, to be bound. So he's saying in that case, the believer is not bound in the marriage covenant any longer and they're free to remarry. Why? Because the unbeliever said, I'm out of here. I'm done. I don't want any part of this Christianity stuff, this Jesus stuff, and I'm gone. And they leave. They're good. I mean. Okay, they end the marriage.

And so, when the unbeliever ends the marriage, in that situation, Paul says, the believer is not bound. But again, let me reiterate, you don't know whether the unbeliever might come to the Lord.

In verse 16, it says, *“For how do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?”* The fact of the matter is, you don't know. You don't know. You don't know whether, unless the Lord has spoken to you personally. I mean, that's the only way you would know.

If God gave you a personal revelation and said, this individual is going to come to Me eventually, which he can do if He wants to. I'm not going to limit God on what He can say to you. But, barring some sort of a personal revelation from the Lord, you don't know whether this person is going to come to Christ.

I have seen unbelieving marriage partners recognize the grace of God in their spouse's life and eventually bend their knee. I bet you we have some in our, in the room right here. Where you were married to a believer and you were an unbeliever, and you saw changes in their life that were just unmistakable, and you could attribute it to nothing but God. And you opened your heart and you gave your life to Jesus because of it. And that's great.

But I've seen the opposite too. I've seen unbelievers who are married to a believer stubbornly dig in their heels and just refuse to accept or acknowledge the grace of God that is very clearly operating in their spouse's life. And so we don't know how this thing is going to go. That's why we're called to pray on their behalf. That's why we're called to do battle in prayer on behalf of those unbelievers.

I love it. When I hear of a believer here at Calvary Chapel, who's married to an unbeliever, who is just crying out day and night for the soul of their spouse. I just, it delights my heart to hear that's going on.

And they're taking up that ministry of prayer and being very serious about it. It's a beautiful thing to see. But that's why we battle on behalf of their soul.