

First Corinthians

February 23, 2025

Chapter 7

The Matters of Marriage

“The Saints and Non-Saints in Marriage”

Paul addressed the disturbing divisions in Chapters 1 through 4, immorality in Chapters 5 and 6, and now the marriage matters in the Church in Chapter 7.

B. Marriage Matters (7:1-40)

1. The Man and Wife – The Reason for Each (7:1-7)

¹ *Now concerning the things about which you wrote, it is good for a man not to touch a woman.* ² *But because of immoralities, each man is to have his own wife, and each woman is to have her own husband.*

Chloe may have asked Paul about a proper marriage relationship because of the immoral report of the man who had taken his stepmother as a wife.

That said, Paul’s initial statement on the subject is, “*It is good for a man not to touch a woman.*” This statement is directed at single men. The Greek word for “good” is *kalon*, which signifies something excellent. If Paul had meant to convey good in the way we understand it today, he would have chosen the Greek word *agathos*, but he did not. Paul is neither downplaying a relationship with a woman nor promoting it. For Paul, what we now call celibacy is excellent for *a man*. The Church should not view that man as if something is wrong with him.

Many excellent commentators bring the beliefs of Gnosticism in at this point to try to read into Paul’s words circumstances that are not there. We will not discuss Gnosticism’s views on singlehood and marriage because Paul does not support or deny it. Rather, he is considering single men who have no trouble refraining from having a relationship with a woman. If a man can live righteously single, Paul says, *it is an excellent thing*.

But Paul knows better. He understands that most men have a drive instilled in them by the LORD to seek a relationship with a woman. He says, “*But because of immoralities...*” Paul has already addressed *immoralities*, referring to *fornication*. Fornication is a sin. When Paul states, “*But because of immoralities*,” he indicates that to prevent a single person from committing fornication, something else should happen. What is that something else? Paul provides the answer.

“*...each man is to have his own wife...*” Pure and simple. Perfect and sinless. If a man desires to have a sexual relationship and be sinless in that relationship, a man should select a wife.

Paul also understands that women have the same drive as men. Therefore, concerning the *fornication of a woman*, to avoid that sin, he says, “*and each woman is to have her own husband.*” Paul did not say of the woman, “it is good for a woman not to touch a man.” But the context of verses 1 and 2 indicates that if a man wishes to remain single, it is an excellent thing. Likewise, Paul would follow that it is also excellent if a woman wishes to remain single. Once married, Paul addressed the duties of the new husband and the new wife.

a) The Duties of Each (7:3)

Paul says to the husband and wife,

³ *The husband must fulfill his duty to his wife, and likewise also the wife to her husband.*

“...fulfill his duty...” “Duty” in Greek is *Ophelia*, and means an applied obligation of the husband to the wife and the wife to the husband. “Fulfill” in Greek is *apodidoto* and means to give back in return. A man gives to his wife, and a wife gives to her husband. Paul now addresses the authority of the husband and wife in their union.

b) The Authority of Each (7:4)

Paul says,

⁴ The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; and likewise also the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does.

With this sentence, we know that when Paul says, “fulfill his duty to his wife, and likewise also the wife to her husband,” he is speaking of the sexual relationship between the two, the time of *giving back to each other in return*.

In the union of the marriage, a single man and a single woman become one body. In that union, the woman’s body belongs to her husband. The man’s body belongs to his wife. With that ownership established, Paul instructs each.

c) The Instruction to Each (7:5-7)

Paul says,

⁵ Stop depriving one another, except by agreement for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer, and come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. ⁶ But this I say by way of concession, not of command. ⁷ Yet I wish that all men were even as I myself am. However, each man has his own gift from God, one in this manner, and another in that.

“Stop depriving one another...” We must wonder if this statement responded to something in the letter Paul received from Corinth. The Greek word for “depriving” is *apostereite*. It means defrauding or cheating on what is right. When a husband or wife withholds from having a sexual relationship with each other, the one withholding is defrauding or cheating the other from a rightful, Godly relationship.

But Paul also understands that there are times when a sexual relationship between husband and wife needs to wait. Paul says that determination can be made by “agreement.” One should not deny on their own. It should be by mutual consent. The husband and wife should talk about it so each understands the reason why one does not want to participate in the sexual relationship.

Paul says, “except by agreement for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer...” Few understand the magnitude of what Paul has just said. Paul knows well that life is filled with times of trouble. Troubles turn our attention to the LORD. When we look to the LORD, we pray.

But as you know, troubles linger for long periods in our lives. Speaking to the husband and wife as one united, one body, Paul tells them to agree. That means whatever happens in their lives is to be shared with the other.

Sometimes, prayer is all they can do. Caring for ailing family members can separate a husband and wife. Work conditions and job transfers can also create distance between spouses. Mourning and grief can also push marital responsibilities to the background.

2. The Unmarried and Others – The Struggles That Come (7:8-40)

(1) To the Unmarried and Widowed (7:8-9)

Paul knew that the unmarried and others have struggles that come to all. And so, Paul speaks to the unmarried and widowed. Verse 8.

⁸ *But I say to the unmarried and to widows that it is good for them if they remain even as I.* ⁹ *But if they do not have self-control, let them marry; for it is better to marry than to burn with passion.*

Paul has not changed his tune at all. For whatever reason a person is unmarried or widowed, meaning single, Paul says, “*it is good for them if they remain even as I.*” Once again, Paul uses the same Greek word for “good,” meaning that singleness is an excellent thing. Once again, Paul is saying that no one should condemn you or judge you because of you being single, especially after the death of a spouse. Paul speaks of widows who are single now. When he says to the unmarried, he is talking to men who have lost their wives to death. We call those widowers, but that term is not used in the Bible. So, in this passage, Paul is speaking to those who have lost their spouses.

To those, Paul gives a warning. “*But if they do not have self-control, let them marry.*” Here, we must be blunt. When Paul uses the word “*self-control*,” he means someone who cannot control the urges to have a sexual relationship with the opposite sex. If that is the case – marry. He goes on to say, “*for it is better to marry than to burn with passion.*” If that is the case – marry. Paul probably understood that when a person has been in a great marriage, and the spouse has died, that person longs to be in another great marriage. Burning with passion does not explicitly mean a sexual relationship because you can burn with passion in loneliness, longing to be married again. But in this case, the context is sure: Paul is talking about burning with passion for a sexual relationship with a spouse. However, Paul must have also known, because there is nothing new under the sun, that a recently singled person can burn in passion for a sexual relationship even when no one is there to have that relationship with. That point alone can contribute to the state of loneliness that a widow or widower can have. The two are often tied together. Loneliness may be the excuse for depression, but that is only because few want to admit they miss the sexual relationship.

However, with some marriages, Paul must speak to those seeking divorce.

(2) To Those Seeking Divorce (7:10-11)

To the wife and the husband in difficult marriages, Paul says,

¹⁰ *But to the married I give instructions, not I, but the Lord, that the wife should not leave her husband*
¹¹ *(but if she does leave, she must remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband should not divorce his wife.*

Let us remember that this letter is to the saints in the Church. This letter is not an instruction to non-saints. To the wife and the husband, the LORD’s teaching is not to separate from each other. Interestingly, the NASB we are using tells the wife not to “leave” her husband, and it tells the husband not to divorce his wife. The Greek word for “leave” means to *separate*. This means that wives are not to *desert* their husbands. In the Greek life of that day, wives had to desert the marriage to end the marriage. On the other hand, for a man to end the marriage, it had to be done by a formal *divorce*. Be that as it may, the Greek culture was extremely lax on divorces and granted them quickly. (Hermann-Stark, Griech. Privat-alterthümer, §§ 30. 15, 17). This instruction had not yet been given to the Churches and saints in the Roman Empire. Paul has a reason for addressing this word from the LORD. In Greek society, marriages were often arranged by parents or guardians where no affection existed among the couples. In addition, once one’s spouse became a saint and part of the Church, struggles occurred in the marriage because of differing morals. For this reason, the LORD tells couples not to abandon or divorce the marriage. Couples who are not both saints of the LORD before coming into the marriage should remain married. Paul will tell us why they should stay together shortly, directing his comment to unequally yoked people.

(3) To Those Unequally Yoked (7:12-24)**(a) Call to Stay (7:12-14)**

To the unequally yoked marriages, Paul gives the call to stay. He says,

¹² But to the rest I say, not the Lord, that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he must not divorce her. ¹³ And a woman who has an unbelieving husband, and he consents to live with her, she must not send her husband away. ¹⁴ For the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her believing husband; for otherwise your children are unclean, but now they are holy.

First, saints should never intentionally enter an unequally yoked marriage with a non-believer. However, non-believers marry non-believers, forming an equally yoked marriage that will become unequally yoked when one spouse becomes a saint. Here is the problem Paul must address.

Saints with unbelieving spouses are unequally yoked. However, desertion or divorce is not to take place. Why? Sanctification occurs. The purity and sanctification of the saints far outweigh the unbelief of the unsanctified, non-believing spouse. Sanctification means *to be set apart*. The non-believing spouse is not *set apart* as a saint. Yet, the non-believing spouse is in a marriage where one-half of the marriage is *set apart* as a saint. Holiness exists in the marriage. Morality exists in the marriage. Godliness exists in the marriage. The righteousness of God should surround the non-believing spouse to the point that it cannot be ignored. It is a constant witness to the non-believing spouse, which cannot be denied. Eventually, the non-believing spouse may become a saint simply through the testimony of the witness of the believing spouse.

The same is true of the children in an unequally yoked home. A home that began as two pagans, but one spouse came to know the LORD. The children of that union are also *set apart* for the same reason as the unbelieving spouse. They, too, see the witness of the believing spouse and cannot ignore or deny it. The children born in the pagan marriage are *unclean* because they would not experience the goodness of the LORD in a home void of the LORD. But in a home where a saint is a parent, the children will experience the goodness of the LORD as they watch the life of their believing parent. The holy parent who lives a holy life. The children will undoubtedly see the unholy and holy in the unequally yoked marriage. Nevertheless, they will know the difference between those who love the LORD and those who do not.

However, Paul must address the need for a call to peace when an unbelieving spouse in an unequally yoked marriage desires to leave or divorce.

(b) Call to Peace (7:15-16)

Paul says in verse 15,

¹⁵ Yet if the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave; the brother or the sister is not under bondage in such cases, but God has called us to peace. ¹⁶ For how do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife?

The saint in the marriage must not leave or divorce; however, the unbelieving spouse may desire to leave. If that occurs, the saint is to let them leave peacefully. At that time, the saint can go on with life and marry another. Although this passage seems to be about the pagan spouse who wants to end the marriage, it is really about the saint's attitude in the marriage. The saint should desire that the marriage continue. As long as the saint is in the marriage, the pagan spouse should be seeing the constant witness of the saint in the way they live in the marriage. That life in the marriage should be of such character and love that the pagan wants the same thing the saint has,

Jesus. As long as the saint is in the marriage, the pagan spouse may come to Jesus because of the saint's love, demeanor, and actions.

And so, Paul gives the call to remain.

(c) Call to Remain (7:17-24)

(i) Example of Jewish Circumcision (7:17-20)

Coming off the message to saints to remain in a marriage that began while both were pagans, Paul gives similar examples that should also fall into his call to stay without abandonment. He gives the example of Jewish Circumcision.

¹⁷ Only, as the Lord has assigned to each one, as God has called each, in this manner let him walk. And so I direct in all the Churches. ¹⁸ Was any man called when he was already circumcised? He is not to become uncircumcised. Has anyone been called in uncircumcision? He is not to be circumcised. ¹⁹ Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but what matters is the keeping of the commandments of God. ²⁰ Each man must remain in that condition in which he was called.

Remember, the Church is not a Jewish or Gentile Church. At that time, Jewish boys were circumcised at birth; Gentile boys were not. But now, as saints of the LORD, the Jew and the Gentile are called to remain as they were before becoming saints. The Gentile does not need to become Jewish or have the ritual of circumcision. Neither does the Jew need to try to be uncircumcised, which is an impossibility. Each is to be a saint in the condition they came to know the LORD.

Now, Paul uses the example of slavery.

(ii) Example of Slavery (7:21-24)

Paul says,

²¹ Were you called while a slave? Do not worry about it; but if you are able also to become free, rather do that. ²² For he who was called in the Lord while a slave, is the Lord's freedman; likewise he who was called while free, is Christ's slave. ²³ You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men. ²⁴ Brethren, each one is to remain with God in that condition in which he was called.

Remaining in the condition or circumstance you were when you accepted the LORD does not change your condition or circumstance. If you were a slave of a Roman slave owner, when you became a saint, it does not remove you from being a slave. Conversely, being a free Roman citizen when you become a saint does not move you into slavery. But as a slave and saint, you are immediately free in the eyes of the LORD for all eternity. In the same way, as a free person, upon your sainthood, you have immediately become a slave to Christ. Slaves who become saints, and free people who become saints, come to the LORD in the same way, by the purchase of the LORD for their salvation on the cross.

Paul then must address the "Brethren" in the Church. Of course, we have often explained that when Paul uses the word "Brethren," he speaks directly to saints of the Jewish bloodline. His point in pointing this passage to the "Brethren" Jewish saints is to stop them from continuing to attempt to force Gentile saints to jump hurdles of the old Jewish rituals to be part of the Church. That point was settled in 50 AD in the Church Council in Jerusalem (See Acts 15). In addition, it had already been handled in Antioch, Syria, as reported in Galatians 2:11-21. The "Brethren" Jewish saints in Corinth, no doubt, disagreed with the decision of the Church leadership in Corinth or Antioch.

In summary, a marriage that began as unbelievers, once a spouse becomes a saint, he or she should remain in the marriage, just as Jews must stay as they were circumcised before becoming saints, slaves, or the freed would still be slaves or freed after becoming saints.

But what about those who are virgins? Paul says they can marry or remain single.

(4) To Those Virgins – To Marry or Remain Single (7:25)

Paul says in verse 25,

²⁵ Now concerning virgins I have no command of the Lord, but I give an opinion as one who by the mercy of the Lord is trustworthy.

When we think of virgins, we think of women who have never had a sexual relationship in or out of marriage. But, the Greek word for “*virgin*” applies to males and females alike. For virgin sons and daughters, Paul has no instruction on marriage. Without instruction, Paul leaves it up to the son or daughter to marry or remain single. However, this, too, is based on Paul’s teaching concerning being unequally yoked with a non-believer. Single saints should never become unequally yoked in marriage with a non-believer. Now, Paul addresses the married and the single, to marry or not.

(5) To the Married or Single – To Marry or Not (7:26-35)

(a) How to Remain (7:26-28)

Paul speaks of how to remain in the condition that you are right now. Paul says in verse 26,

²⁶ I think then that this is good in view of the present distress, that it is good for a man to remain as he is. ²⁷ Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be released. Are you released from a wife? Do not seek a wife. ²⁸ But if you marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned. Yet such will have trouble in this life, and I am trying to spare you.

We must ask the question, what was the “*present distress*?” When Paul wrote this letter in 57 AD, just 27 years after the death, burial, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, Jews who lived all over the Roman Empire were aggressively attacking the Church. And the Roman government was making it difficult for both Jews and Christians. If you quickly read the book of Acts Chapter 13 to the end of the book, you will see that the Jews never ceased to torment the Church, and neither did the Roman Government. Certainly, for all those in that area of the world, it was a time of distress for Christians.

Continuing with his instruction to the saints, Paul calls on them to remain in their current marital state. No sin occurs for those who want to move into a marriage.

Then Paul says, “*Yet such will have trouble in this life, and I am trying to spare you.*” What is the trouble Paul is trying to avoid? You might think that Paul is talking about trouble in being married, but he is not. He is talking about life's troubles at that time in the Roman Empire as the Church was developing and spreading across the empire. In other words, Paul is saying that it does not matter if you are married or single; there is a good possibility that trouble is heading your way. As a married person, you will be responsible for getting your whole family out of the trouble zone. As a single person, you will be responsible for getting yourself out of the trouble zone. It is much easier for a single person to take precautions than a married person. When Paul says, “*I am trying to spare you,*” he is simply forewarning the saints of what may come so they can be prepared.

Paul now tells married or single people how to think in the coming days of trouble.

(b) How to Think (7:29-35)

(i) The Day Will Come (7:29-31)

Paul says,

²⁹ *But this I say, brethren, the time has been shortened, so that from now on those who have wives should be as though they had none;* ³⁰ *and those who weep, as though they did not weep; and those who rejoice, as though they did not rejoice; and those who buy, as though they did not possess;* ³¹ *and those who use the world, as though they did not make full use of it; for the form of this world is passing away.*

Notice the series of striking contrasts. What is Paul saying? We could delve into each and discuss the differences as some commentators do, but that would delude Paul's intent. Notice that the whole passage is one sentence. It is meant to be held together. In Paul's characteristic style, he inserts wonderful thoughts and delves deeper into the problems and troubles the saints are having as the Church expands. He starts with "*the time has been shortened,*" and ends with "*the form of this world is passing away.*" The two go together. The first is his introduction into his thought, the last is his conclusion to his thought. The whole idea is based on the troubles occurring with the saints in the Church at the time.

"... *the time has been shortened.*" Paul expresses in this phrase that "Life is short on this earth for every saint and sinner." To support this, he states, "*the form of this world is passing away.*" He means that "The life of saints and sinners will eventually come to an end here on earth." Everything Paul discusses between these two statements serves as a brief overview of how events unfold in life. For instance, you get married, and then your spouse passes away. You weep, and then the tears dry up. You experience a moment of joy, and then the pleasure wanes. You buy something, and soon it becomes useless. The people in the world help you navigate life, but then that assistance fades, leaving you to struggle for survival. That's just how life on earth operates as this world turns.

But notice that Paul is saying this to the "*brethren.*" He is speaking to the Jewish saints, not the Gentile saints. This exhortation undoubtedly applies just as much to the Gentiles as it does to the Jews, but in that day, it was the Jews who were most affected by Caesar's rules in the Roman Empire.

Paul now says the concerns will come.

(ii) **The Concerns Will Come (7:32-35)**

³² *But I want you to be free from concern. One who is unmarried is concerned about the things of the Lord, how he may please the Lord;* ³³ *but one who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how he may please his wife,* ³⁴ *and his interests are divided. The woman who is unmarried, and the virgin, is concerned about the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and spirit; but one who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how she may please her husband.* ³⁵ *This I say for your own benefit; not to put a restraint upon you, but to promote what is appropriate and to secure undistracted devotion to the Lord.*

Concerns will come, but Paul wants the saints, especially Jewish ones, to be free from those concerns. Once again, we can parse this passage into pages and pages of commentary, but it, too, will dilute Paul's actual intent.

It is absolutely appropriate for spouses to be concerned about each other. The things of this world are not bad. What are the things of this world that spouses must be concerned about? Think about it. It is an easy question. Let us answer the question with questions that spouses think about. "What will we eat today? How will we provide for our children? Where are we going to stay on the road tonight?" These are good examples of the "*things of the world*" that we all face daily. The wife is concerned about the husband. The husband is concerned about the wife. Both are concerned about their children. And with all the world's concerns, the spouses must remain devoted to the LORD at the same time.

The single interacts with friends and extended families. If they do not want to continue in a relationship that causes them grief, they can walk away. However, in families, they cannot walk away from their interactions. With each child, added wants and desires add to the pressure of providing for the daily needs. And yet, the family must remain devoted to the LORD. Both for the single and married, their interaction and devotion are appropriate. But the married has more to be concerned about than the single. That is all Paul is saying in this passage. It is because of concerns about the times in the Roman Empire that Paul has given this warning to the saints. He does not want them to change their marital status to get out of harm's way; he is just warning saints that married spouses have more to be concerned about than singles.

Now, Paul needs to say something to the fathers with virgin daughters.

(6) To the Fathers – With Virgin Daughters (7:36-38)

Paul says,

³⁶ But if any man thinks that he is acting unbecomingly toward his virgin daughter, if she is past her youth, and if it must be so, let him do what he wishes, he does not sin; let her marry. ³⁷ But he who stands firm in his heart, being under no constraint, but has authority over his own will, and has decided this in his own heart, to keep his own virgin daughter, he will do well. ³⁸ So then both he who gives his own virgin daughter in marriage does well, and he who does not give her in marriage will do better.

What in the world does Paul mean by this paragraph? “Unbecomingly” does not mean that the father has done something sinful with his virgin daughter. See where Paul says, “*if she is past her youth.*” These are important words. It means that when she is a full-grown woman, she is past the normal marrying age. In those days, marriages were arranged between parents. Being past the marrying age, Paul tells the father to “*let her marry.*” In other words, let her make the choice concerning marriage. If she loves a man, let her marry by her choice, not the father's. Even if he wishes his daughter to remain unmarried, that is not a sin. However, if the daughter wishes to marry, that is not a sin. We must remember this: Paul's recommendation here is to the saints concerning the troublesome times in the Roman Empire for Christians. With the daughter reaching the age of maturity as a woman, Paul is letting the father know that it is now time to let her make her own decision about marriage. Either way, the father should support his daughter even though it may be a decision he disagrees with.

One final entry remains in this chapter for Paul. To the wife, Paul will give counsel concerning what is appropriate after the husband's death.

(7) To the Wife – After the Death of the Husband (7:39-40)

Paul says,

³⁹ A wife is bound as long as her husband lives; but if her husband is dead, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord. ⁴⁰ But in my opinion she is happier if she remains as she is; and I think that I also have the Spirit of God.

Paul has not broken his initial advice that living as a single in the current troubles of the Roman Empire at the time is easier and brings fewer hiccups in life. However, he also said that if a person wanted to marry again, let that person marry; there is no sin. To address every possible situation, Paul says that with the spouse's death, the living one is free to marry, but as a saint, “*only in the LORD.*” That means she must marry another unmarried saint. She must not be unequally yoked to a non-believer. She is a saint “*in the LORD*” and must marry a saint “*in the LORD.*” However, whether or not she marries after the death of her husband is not a sin.