

20220322 1 Corinthians 7 – An Eternal Perspective

This is an unusual way to make our way through this text, but I will do it explaining the text as we move through it. Paul's talking about singleness, marriage, and sex. He will examine how the ministry is affected by our single or married status. Whatever our relational status is, we should have an eye toward serving Jesus and knowing that His return is imminent. And someday, the cares and things we are so focused on now will all burn. In terms of ministry, Paul will first address singleness. The big idea is that is not that God desires or requires us to stay single, but that being single causes less distractions in a person's life. Because of the issues that seem to need to be addressed in every several verses, as mentioned, I'm going to go through the text explaining it as we progress. Let's begin.

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. Many will note that in the New King James and other translations, it says that it is good for a man to not touch a woman. This is the problem with translations. I remember going to a high school retreat and the guy leading it told the group that guys and girls shouldn't hug, kiss, or hold hands before being married. This created some real dysfunction in the normal progression of dating. That was wrong teaching. The Greek here isn't talking about merely making physical contact with a person of the opposite sex, but having sex with them. We know what we're talking about here. We're talking about sexual intercourse, and of course this isn't a blanket statement or no married persons would engage in intercourse. It's important when reading a biblical text to look at the entirety of the text.

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. [He's talking about the responsibilities of marriage. In marriage you don't have the right to say 'don't touch me' just because you're having a spat or something. Our bodies are available to one another in the pleasure that God provide us through the beauty of sex in its proper place.] **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.** [Paul's saying that a couple can forego relations for a period of time, but only by agreement and for the purpose of taking a spiritual retreat. Abstaining from sex for an agree period of time is another way to fast and pray. A man and a wife can have a fast from relations with one another, and that's okay and in fact it can be healthy. Paul says don't make it too long because when we do so it is possible to create a weakness that Satan can get in and play with.]

6 Now, as a concession, not a command, I say this. 7 I wish that all were as I myself am. [He's making this statement in the context of ministry because having a spouse creates distractions. You're not out solo on your own. Being married to another person divides a person's attention from things other than the Lord if you're in ministry.] **But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another.** [But, each is given a gift from God. This means that some have

a gift of celibacy, but not all do. Paul's saying he'd rather that they not be distracted with a spouse, but only some have a gift of singleness. Not everyone has the ability to stay single and be satisfied with that.]

8 To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single, as I am. [Paul is making this statement again about singleness and how it benefits a person in certain ways. He's saying, If you end up single, it's good to stay that way if you are able to do so.] **9 But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion.** [As a pastor and counselor, I've told couples not to have too long of an engagement because the drive to be together physically is so strong. It's better to get married; and don't burn. If you've prayed about it and you know you want to be married to someone, then get married. Long engagements don't help with sexual purity. Some of you reading this sermon or hearing it, have heard this from me. When you've come to me and told me you're planning on marrying someone, I've told you, "Well, let's go ahead and do this now!"]

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. [Paul is probably addressing some who had become believers and now they found themselves married to an unbeliever. He is saying that this is not cause to separate. This isn't a biblical ground for divorce. Sexual infidelity is a proper grounds for divorce. That means cheating on your spouse. But the assumption in this situation is that it is not that kind of situation; if they are not involved in that kind of situation but need to separate, then just stay unmarried. If you really feel the need to separate, then just stay unmarried. A separation is not a divorce.]

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. [Paul is here giving his own opinion and not something from the Lord. However, I would remind you that all scripture is inspired by God so these are inspired words.] **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 [some Bibles say sanctified.] 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.** [Having an unbelieving spouse is not a cause for divorce. Stay with your unbelieving spouse because it gives the kids an opportunity to come to Christ, and it gives the unbelieving spouse an opportunity to come to faith in Christ. This passage doesn't mean that the unbelieving spouse can get to heaven through the believer. It gives an opportunity for that unbelieving spouse to benefit from the blessings that come from being married to a member of the Body of Christ.]

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. [This is the situation where an unbeliever wants out. They can go. Paul says the Christian spouse is not tied to the marriage. They are free to remarry.] **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?** [This is the opportunity I've just spoken of, that the unbelieving spouse can be saved. If you're married to an unbeliever, you should be praying every

day for your spouse to come to faith in Christ. Live your life righteously before God and love that spouse with the love of Christ. You may win him or her to Jesus in that way.]

Pastoral Commentary

I've been speaking to you as a pastor, but now I'm going to switch hats just a little bit and speak to you from the perspective of a lawyer. God has an ideal for marriage that is pretty clear in scripture, but we also know that God gave Moses instructions on divorce. And Jesus explains that this was done because of "their hard hearts" (Matthew 19:8). In my practice of law, I have seen instances where abuse in a marriage becomes so intense that it becomes deadly. Once, a Christian woman came to me and asked me if she should divorce. The verbal and emotional abuse was so intense that she told me that she literally thought it would kill her within a couple of years if she didn't get out of the marriage. I told her to separate from her abusive spouse and to divorce him. I didn't tell her to remarry, but I told her to get out of the marriage for her own good and to preserve her life.

I am asked often about whether abuse is a biblical reason for divorce. Abuse can be physical, verbal, emotional, or spiritual. These are very sensitive questions. Abuse in marriage is horrible. I've seen this first as a lawyer and now as a pastor. If a woman or a man is experiencing abuse of any kind, I believe that is an immediate reason to allow them to separate and get into a safe place. Verbal abuse is real. Sandy and I have let women take safe harbor in our home or on our properties. I would never say to a woman or a man being abused that they should stay there and take it. I suppose part of that is because, as a lawyer, I've seen what the end can look like.

The other thing I'm asked is if abuse is a proper ground for divorce. The Bible doesn't really give abuse as a ground for divorce that is clearly articulated. I wish it were in there, but I can't find it. Yet, as a lawyer, knowing what Jesus said about the Writ of Divorce, I have recommended divorce sometimes for those whose hard hearts have left them no other way out. Yet, the grounds for biblical divorce have to do with sexual immorality (Matt 5:32) and/or marriage infidelity. The Greek word is *porneia*, and it covers a broad definition of sexually immoral acts. So, how does abuse fit in?

I can't say from a biblical standpoint that it's okay to divorce an abuser from a biblical standpoint, but it sure doesn't keep a person from separating from the abuser. I don't try to talk people out of divorcing an abuser, but I don't condemn them either. I practiced law long enough, and I've been on planet Earth long enough to know that sometimes two people just can't stay together. Either one person or both are tearing each other apart, and there is no benefit left in staying married. If they are both Christian, their dysfunction brings shame on the cause of Christ. Their marriage should reflect the relationship between Christ and the Church. When it does not, it hurts the cause of Christ. I am not saying if they leave a marriage because of abuse, they have biblical license to remarry. But, I'm saying that sometimes broken people in a broken world would just do better to be apart.

Live as You Are Called

17 Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him. This is my rule in all the churches. 18 Was anyone at the time of his call already circumcised? Let him not seek to remove the marks of circumcision. Was anyone at the time of his call uncircumcised? Let him not seek circumcision. 19 For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God. [So what is Paul referring to when he exhorts the reader to “keep the commandments of God?” If someone is into legalism, this will totally confuse them. Paul isn’t talking about the Levitical law, but rather moving forward in your life obeying the two greatest commandments whether you’re a saved Jew or a Greek.]

20 Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called. 21 Were you a bondservant when called? Do not be concerned about it. (But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity.) 22 For he who was called in the Lord as a bondservant is a freedman of the Lord. Likewise, he who was free when called is a bondservant of Christ. 23 You were bought with a price; do not become bondservants of men. 24 So, brothers, in whatever condition each was called, there let him remain with God.

Paul is basically telling the Corinthians to not stir things up when one of the partners gets saved. Just hold steady and don’t make any radical changes in your relationships. Paul is addressing a situation in which two pagans would get married, and then one would become a Christian, and Paul gives instructions to them. He now addresses the believer, and the overall message is just stay where you are when you came to Christ. You don’t need to change everything in your life just because you came to Jesus. Paul is talking about how when people came to Christ, they felt the need to radically change everything in their lives. In 17, he says, “Just keep leading your life as you’re supposed to do.” This doesn’t mean to not let God make changes in your life, but don’t go trying to change everything yourself. The newly saved person doesn’t need to go get a new job, a new spouse, and a new anything. If you were already circumcised, leave it alone. If you aren’t circumcised, you don’t need to go out and get circumcised. It was a sign for the Jews showing they were the sons of the Covenant. If you are a slave in a home, keep serving, but work to try to buy your freedom.

The Unmarried and the Widowed

We must remember in our marital relationships that what God wants is not our happiness, but our holiness. God raises the bar above what our culture tells us is appropriate. Cultural standards are below what God says. This is a very difficult subject because divorce is so pervasive in our society. I practiced law for many years, and I saw the pain that it caused families. Sometimes it impacts friendships, church congregations, and extended families. I used to tell my clients that there’s no faster way to financial devastation than divorce.

It is important to understand what the Bible says. There is a message in here for our singles, for our couples, and for those who have gone through divorce. Some tell me, “Well, we’re just living together to see if we’re compatible so we won’t be subject to getting divorced.” Believer it or not, statistics show that those who live together before they get married have a 12% higher chance of eventually going through a divorce. Another statistic that is alarming is that a person who goes through a series of divorces, has a greater chance with each successive marriage of

being divorced. What's the big message? Divorce is destructive. A horrible marriage is also destructive but we should try our best to be in relationships reflective of Christ and the Church.

We'll now move on to verses 25-40. Paul is still talking about marriage. There are some challenging things to look at here from a translation standpoint. Let's try to figure out what the Greek might mean.

25 Now concerning the betrothed [the unmarried], **I have no command from the Lord, but I give my judgment as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy.** [Paul's giving his own opinion and not something he received in divine revelation. I still think we need to listen closely as Paul carries way more spiritual weight than something that Pastor Faber might say. Paul's ideas would rank among the primary sources of divine instruction. As mentioned a minute ago, God inspired this, along with everything else that Paul says in the passage.] **26 I think that in view of the present distress it is good for a person to remain as he is.** [Paul is obviously speaking to a group that is in a difficult time of some kind; probably it was because of persecution. This word "betrothed" is the word "*parthenos*", which is typically translated as "virgin" or "maiden". He's not just talking about unmarried women. He's addressing men and women and anyone who is single, and whether they should marry, concerning how it might affect their ministry.]

27 Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife. 28 But if you do marry, you have not sinned, and if a betrothed woman marries, she has not sinned. Yet those who marry will have worldly troubles, and I would spare you that. [Paul is pointing out that in a way, life is easier when a person is single. Being married ties a person to another person with their desires and preferences. Marriage in a fallen world presents its own challenges. This is not right or wrong advice, but just life advice and how it is easier to do ministry. He adds that if you're married, just stick with it. It is not sin.]

29 This is what I mean, brothers: the appointed time has grown very short. From now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none,³⁰ and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods,³¹ and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away. [Paul is just accentuating that those things that are physical are passing away into the spiritual. Paul uses his words to convey that this world and all that is in it will pass away. He's challenging us to prioritize our lives to be ready for Jesus to return at any time. We become very focused on just living day to day and as Scott T. often reminds us, "It's all gonna burn."]

32 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 is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife,³⁴ and his interests are divided. And the unmarried or betrothed woman 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, how to please her husband.³⁵ I say this for your own benefit, not to lay any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord. [Paul continues with the idea of just telling us that life as a single person

allows one's attention to be focused on the Lord. Paul knew that Jesus could come back at any time, and in the eternal scheme of things, a single person can stay more focused on the Lord and on Him alone." Paul is addressing how we are to live in knowing that Jesus could return at any time. We are all to live with different priorities. Living as a single person might lead you to a life of less anxiety.]

The following verses are muddled up by different translations.

If you read the following verses in the NASB and the NKJV, they look very different. The ESV directs the instruction to the person who is betrothed to the woman. This makes more sense.

36 If anyone thinks that he is not behaving properly toward his betrothed, if his passions are strong, [can also mean a person past their prime to marry] **and it has to be, let him do as he wishes: let them marry—it is no sin.** [If two are committed to be together, and if they engage in sexual relations, then let them go ahead and marry. They don't need to burn with sexual desire, but need to go ahead and move up the wedding date. Long engagements are just an invitation to sin.]

³⁷ But whoever is firmly established in his heart, being under no necessity but having his desire under control, and has determined this in his heart, to keep her as his betrothed, he will do well. ³⁸ So then he who marries his betrothed does well, and he who refrains from marriage will do even better. [This sounds like Paul is engaging in double-speak. But what he's saying again is that being single will lead to less distractions in one's life.]

³⁹ A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord. ⁴⁰ Yet in my judgment she is happier if she remains as she is. And I think that I too have the Spirit of God. [Paul concludes, saying that if a spouse passes away, the surviving spouse is free to remarry, but only in the Lord. This means she must marry a believer.]

This is an instruction to each and every one of us. It applies to singles, singles again, and any of us. Yet, Paul ends by saying that singleness has a superior position. Paul ends with an odd statement about the Spirit of God. This is perhaps in response to some comment made in the letter sent to him. Paul isn't saying people shouldn't marry, but he's speaking about priorities and what is of utmost importance in our lives. He lived his life with an eye toward eternity, and so should we.

I think the takeaway for each of us is that if you're married to another believer, start truly trying to have a marriage that reflects the love of Christ. If you're married to an unbeliever, behave in a way that brings glory to God and can win your unbelieving spouse over. If you're single and you're good with that, try to stay that way. If you're single and you're super unhappy being single, find a Christian spouse and marry them.

Let us pray.