



Married or Unmarried?

1 Corinthians 7



Background

When attempting to understand an epistle (letter), it is important to remember that it usually addresses a particular situation. Paul had received information concerning the Corinthian church from several sources (1:11; 16:17), including a letter from them (7:1). Apparently, some of the church members were saying that Christians should be celibate¹ even if they were married.² Since Paul was unmarried and celibate, they may have used him as an example of the truly spiritual man. In response, Paul explains his views and preferences concerning celibacy and marriage.

To the Married (and Formerly Married)

- ❑ Read 1 Corinthians 7:1-16. Verse 1 is interpreted in different ways.³ One translation says,
 - 📖 “Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: ‘It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.’ But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband.” (1:1-2, *ESV*)
- ❑ Celibacy within marriage is impracticable and inappropriate (7:2-5).⁴ While Paul prefers the unmarried and celibate life, he does *not* expect every follower of Christ to be celibate.
 1. What is needed for a Christian to *choose* celibacy and the unmarried life?⁵ (7:7-9)
- ❑ Paul speaks to married Christians concerning divorce. In verses 10-11, he addresses Christian couples.⁶ To both husbands and wives, he says, “Do not divorce your spouse.” In verses 12-13, he addresses Christians who are married to unbelievers.⁷
 2. What are Paul’s instructions to Christians with unbelieving spouses?⁸

¹ “celibate” – abstaining from sexual intercourse, typically meaning that the person is unmarried.

² In Greek philosophy, spirit was good and matter was evil. Thus the human spirit was divine and the body was corrupt. Based on this view, some believed that a spiritual person could use his/her body however he/she wished, while others believed that a spiritual person should deny his/her body’s desires, including sex. These two views had infected the Corinthian church. In 6:12-20, Paul addressed the first view. In chapter 7, he addresses the second view.

³ See the NIV text note. The original Greek says, “It is good for a man not to touch a woman.” The phrase “to touch” (ἅπτεσθαι, *haptesthai*) was a euphemism for sexual intercourse, so the NIV’s translation is not precise. Gordon Fee says the NIV probably does not reflect the currently prevailing view among commentators. Fee and others say that the statement is from the Corinthians, not from Paul (thus the quotation marks), though Paul can agree partially.

Elsewhere, Paul speaks positively of marriage (Ephesians 5:22-33; Colossians 3:18-19; 1 Timothy 3:1, 12; 5:14). In 1 Timothy 4:1-3, Paul wrote that forbidding people to marry is the teaching of demons, through hypocritical liars.

⁴ In verse 6, Paul says, “I say this as a concession (συγγνώμη, *syngnōmē* – ‘matter of permission’), not a command.” What is “this?” Many commentators say it refers to his words concerning temporary abstinence (7:5).

⁵ Of course, many unmarried believers *want* to be married, but have not “found” their spouse. Others *choose* to stay unmarried, and are content. Such people may have the “gift of celibacy” – freedom from a strong desire or need for sexual fulfillment and/or marriage. However, having a particular gift does not make one person better than another.

⁶ “not I, but the Lord” (7:10) – Paul’s command is based on Jesus’ explicit teaching (Mark 10:6-12); “I, not the Lord” (7:11) – As an apostle of Christ Jesus (1:1), Paul’s words are still Spirit-inspired and authoritative.

⁷ A believer should not marry an unbeliever, but one person in a couple may become a believer after marriage. If you are a believer married to an unbeliever, consider reading *Surviving a Spiritual Mismatch in Marriage* (ICF library).

⁸ The Christian has certain responsibilities, but ultimately he/she cannot control the unbelieving spouse’s actions.

Must You Change Your Situation?

- ❑ Read 1 Corinthians 7:17-24. These verses may appear to be a diversion from the topic of marriage and celibacy, but they communicate the basic principle that Paul is applying throughout this chapter. In general, each person should remain in the situation in which they were when God called them (7:20).
- ❑ Paul is not saying that a person *cannot* change their situation, but they should not feel that change is required to become “more spiritual.” If they are married, they should stay married, even if their spouse is an unbeliever. If they are unmarried, they should stay unmarried (due to the “present crisis”). However, there may be good reasons to change their situation.

Concerning the Unmarried

- ❑ Read 1 Corinthians 7:25-40.

3. Paul offers his advice⁹ concerning “virgins.”¹⁰ In general, he thinks it is better for them (and the men) to remain unmarried. What are his reasons? (7:26, 28, 33-35)¹¹



- ❑ Paul says “that the time is short”¹² (7:29), and that “this world in its present form is passing away” (7:31). Because of this, he says, “those who have wives should live as they had none.” This does not promote celibacy or neglect (see Ephesians 5:25-33!), but reminds us that our relationship with the Lord is greater than even our nearest and dearest human experiences.
 - ❑ While Paul prefers celibacy and the unmarried life, he does not agree that celibacy makes a person more righteous or spiritual. The person who marries also “does right” (7:38).
4. Whether a Christian is married or unmarried, what is Paul’s main concern according to this passage? (7:35)

Reflection & Application

- In verse 23, Paul says again, “you were bought at a price” (*cf.* 6:20). Jesus Christ paid the price for our salvation. He gave his life and died on a cross for our sins, so that we could be forgiven. He was raised from the dead so that we might have life – abundant and eternal. Now God offers salvation to everyone who will receive Christ. Have you received him?
- If you are single, you might not have the “gift of celibacy,” but being single does allow you to serve God in special ways. Are you anxious to find a spouse? Be careful! As a follower of Christ, be sure that he/she “belongs to the Lord” (7:39). And do not be anxious, but “seek first [God’s] kingdom and his righteousness,” and God will meet all your needs (*Matthew 6:33*).
- If you are married, build your marriage on the solid foundation of Jesus Christ. As a believer, fulfill your role as husband or wife according to the Bible,¹³ relying on God’s love and power.

⁹“I have no command from the Lord, but I give a judgment” – Paul’s “judgment” is neither universal command nor mere personal opinion. Rather it is conditional advice from a “trustworthy” source under the inspiration of the Spirit.

¹⁰ “virgin” (παρθένος, *parthenos*) – mostly likely female virgins engaged to be married (that is, “betrothed” [ESV])

¹¹ (7:26) “the present crisis;” (7:28) “troubles in this life” (λασιν τη σαρκί) – lit. “tribulation in the flesh” – It is unclear what Paul is referring to. It may be general (applying broadly) or it may be specific to the time and place of the Corinthians. In any case, Paul’s advice is conditioned on these concerns.

¹² “time” (καιρός, *kairos*) – not speaking of duration of time (*chronos*), but a specific time. With Christ’s coming, the future is now in plain view, so time is “shortened.” The Christian’s perspective, conditioned by the future hope of glory, affects all of our values and sense of purpose relative to this present world, which is passing away.

¹³ See *The Marriage Relationship (According to the Bible)* on the ICF website.