

WHAT ABOUT THE UNMARRIED?

1 Corinthians 7:25-40

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In our present age, to be of marriageable age and remain unmarried is to have the proverbial albatross hung around your neck. If you go to the local bookstore, you will find tons of literature giving advice and counsel, good or bad, on Christian marriage. While the number of books for singles is fewer, it is a growing category in Christian literature. However, these books often have a theme like, “How to suffer through the single life” or “How to cope with singleness.” Others are how-to books offering advice on how to meet the perfect mate while relatively few deal with “the gift of singleness” as described by Paul in this text. Further, today we have the option of e|Harmony.com and numerous other online dating services that more and more Christian singles turn to in hopes of finding that perfect match. As a matter of fact on e|Harmony’s web site, of the 24 options given to answer the registration question, “How did you hear about us?” is listed “My Religious Group.” However, this should not surprise us because the church today has reinforced this focus on singleness, pro or con. “Singles ministries” exploded onto the scene in the 80’s and 90’s. These ministries are structured to cater to those that are of marriageable age but for whatever reason, remain unmarried. These ministries were formed to focus on the “special needs” of this particular homogenous group, whether never married, divorced, or widowed.

Of course, my concern this morning is not to belittle these books or ministries. Books, ministries, and even e|Harmony can be helpful resources in these matters. However, my concern comes when the implication is that there is something wrong with a person who is not married by a certain age. As Paul shows in this text, there is nothing wrong with you if you are unmarried. As a matter of fact, Paul asserts that *there is a greater freedom for the work of gospel ministry for those who are unmarried*. Single life, according to Paul, is not a problem and there are benefits of remaining single.

As we saw a few weeks ago, Paul thought that the best situation for the unmarried was to remain that way. In verses 6-8 Paul wrote, “But this I say by way of concession, not of command. 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. But I say to the unmarried and to widows that it is good for them if they remain even as I.” Paul begins this passage, “**Now concerning virgins.**” Paul elaborates on the condition of the unmarried by addressing another of the questions that the Corinthians had brought up in a prior letter, the case of those that had never been married. These “**virgins**” were probably engaged to be married and apparently there was controversy in the Corinthian church as to whether these couples should go through with their marriage (see v. 36). As earlier in this chapter, Paul offers his counsel, “**I have no command of the Lord, but I give an opinion.**” As we saw a few weeks ago, this does not mean that Paul’s advice is not the inspired, inerrant, infallible Word of God. He still wrote with apostolic authority. He is simply giving advice where Jesus and Scripture were silent on the issue. He reinforces this with the statement, “**as one who by the mercy of the Lord is trustworthy,**” a reference to the trustworthiness of his counsel as being of the Lord. He later closes with the words, “**and I think that I also have the Spirit of God**” (v. 4)) which shows that what he had written was inspired by the Spirit of God and therefore to be regarded as such. So Paul offers an opinion, not a command, to those who had never married. We see four benefits Paul gives for remaining single.

1. Elude the external pressures of marriage (vv. 26-27)

The first benefit Paul gives for remaining unmarried is that the unmarried elude the external pressures of marriage. He writes, **“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”** (v. 26). **“In view of the present distress”** relates to the impending persecution that the Corinthians would experience as Christians under Roman rule. We have the evidence of church history to show us what happened just a few short years down the road to those who professed Christianity. Under Nero, Christians were subjected to all kinds of unbelievable torture. Many were arrested, beaten, imprisoned, and even killed because of their gospel witness. Roger Ellsworth wrote, “Some were fed to lions, while others were covered with wax and used as human torches. Still others were thrown into vats of boiling oil” [*Strengthening Christ’s Church*, 132]. These gruesome actions occurred during Nero’s attempt to stamp out Christianity. Some historians have written that these “human torches” were used in starting the fire that destroyed Rome. Paul himself suffered persecution at the hands of Nero and John Foxe, in his *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs*, lists Erastus, chamberlain of Corinth, as one of Nero’s earliest victims [<http://www.ccel.org/f/foxe/martyrs/fox102.htm>; see also 2 Tim. 4:18]. So Nero’s persecution of Christians was in force at Corinth.

It is in this context that Paul advises these singles in Corinth to remain as they were. **“Are you released from a wife? Do not seek a wife”** (v. 27). As Leon Morris put it, “When high seas are raging is no time for changing ships” [*TNTC: 1 Corinthians*, 113]. Given the likelihood of persecution, these would benefit from not having the added concerns of a spouse and family. Paul was a perfect example of this. If Paul had been married during this time, his family would have faced tremendous turmoil every time he was imprisoned, beaten, and left for dead. He personally would have the added burden of wondering who would watch over his family in his absence. As John MacArthur points out, “His suffering and his practical problems would have increased and the effectiveness of his ministry would have decreased. Married believers who go through social turmoil and persecution cannot escape carrying a much heavier load than those who are single” [*1 Corinthians*, 180]. So Paul’s advice to remain single is given in the context of the severe persecution that could be faced as a believer and the familial anxieties associated with it.

On the other hand, he advises those who were married to remain married, **“Are you bound by a wife? Do not seek to be released.”** Paul had already addressed the fact that marriage is a lifelong commitment that can only be broken by death, adultery, or permissible divorce. For those who were married, God had called them and gifted them for marriage in and for **“the present distress”** and they were to continue to seek to fulfill that calling for the sake of the gospel. Those who were married were to remain married and faithfully and patiently accept the God-given responsibilities of marriage. The present persecutions and the external pressures that it brought on the family were no reason to seek to dissolve the marriage.

So the first benefit of remaining single was, in light of the impending persecution, they could elude the external pressures of marriage.

2. Elude the internal problems of marriage (v. 28)

A second benefit of remaining single was that they would also elude the internal problems associated with marriage. Paul continues, **“But if you marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned.”** Paul makes it clear that it was not a sin to marry. Even those with the gift of singleness do not sin if they marry. He is simply suggesting that it is better to remain single given the current circumstances. With this he gives another benefit of

remaining single, **“Yet such (those who are married) will have trouble in this life, and I am trying to spare you.”** Those who marry will have not only the external burdens from persecution, the concern for the well-being of their family, but also the added burden of the struggles within the marriage. These problems exist in every marriage, regardless of the circumstances.

Internal problems in a marriage are normal. Let’s face it – marriage is hard work. Even in the home of two believers, there will be times of difficulty. Any relationship between two sinners, even saved sinners, is difficult. These difficulties are magnified in a marriage because marriage is the closest relationship between two people—they are one. Yet, each maintains their individuality, their own desires and personalities. Therein lies the difficulty. John MacArthur reminds us,

Believers are still sinful and subject to the limitations and weakness of the flesh. It is hard enough for a sinner to live with himself, let alone with another sinner. When two people are bound together in marriage the problems of the human nature are multiplied. Close living allows us to see our partner’s faults more clearly, and vice versa... The two become one, but they are still two personalities, two distinct people with their own likes and dislikes, their own characteristics, emotions, temperaments, and wills. Each partner has some degree of anger, selfishness, dishonesty, pride, forgetfulness, and thoughtlessness... Marriage involves conflicts, demands, hardships, sacrifices, and adjustments that singleness does not. [*1 Corinthians*, 180-181]

Those of you who are married probably just had the thought that MacArthur must have been hiding in your closet when he wrote this! But isn’t it true? Who knows you best? At times even better than you know yourself? Your spouse and your family. They see you at your best and they see you at your worst. Those closest to you typically know how you are going to act or react or respond in a situation before you do. Paul reminds these at Corinth that to remain single would spare them from these internal pressures associated with marriage, these “conflicts, demands, hardships, sacrifices, and adjustments” as MacArthur called them. Paul is not suggesting that there are not benefits to marriage as well. Nor is he saying that to remain single would be a bed of roses. But his concern was that the Corinthians recognize these internal pressures that come with marriage. And given their present situation, it would be better to remain as they were than have to deal with these added pressures. Paul would seem to agree with Warren Wiersbe who said, “The cheapest thing is the marriage license, and then the price goes up.”

3. Elude the temporal preoccupations of marriage (vv. 29-35)

Paul’s third benefit perhaps addresses the crux of the matter for Paul. Two little phrases show his greatest concern. In v. 29 we read, **“The time has been shortened,”** and in v. 31, **“The form of this world is passing away.”** Both of these phrases convey the shortness of life. Paul reminds the Corinthians that marriage only lasts for a lifetime. When this life passes, marriage goes with it. In light of this shortness of time, particularly as it related to the present persecution, Paul’s advice in v. 29, **“From now on those who have wives should be as though they had none.”** Paul is not suggesting that marriage is not binding or that they no longer should pay attention to the responsibilities they had towards their spouse. But these responsibilities should not interfere with the Christian’s devotion and work for the Lord. The responsibilities of marriage were not to be used as an excuse to become slack in the Lord’s work.

In the context of “the shortness of the time,” Paul suggests that they should live with eternity in mind, that time when they would have no spouse (Matt. 22:30). As Calvin put it, “We ought to be living as if we might leave this world at any moment” [*1 Corinthians*, 160]. Paul then lists four areas that could potentially serve as distractions in a married believer’s service to the Lord stemming from the tremendous responsibilities associated with marriage.

First is the area of emotions, **“Those who weep, as though they did not weep.”** The Corinthians, in light of the present persecution, could lose loved ones, whether to death, physical infirmities, or imprisonment. This would cause great emotional distress. Paul does not suggest that it is wrong to **“weep,”** that it is wrong to grieve in these situations. He is saying that it is wrong to let these circumstances of life cripple us in our efforts for the gospel. They were not to laugh or celebrate in these traumatic circumstances, but they were to see the situation in light of eternity. Those who are married have a greater burden here because of the closeness of the relationship. Though a single person might experience times of sorrow when a friend or family member was lost, the intensity of the sorrow and grief is of a different sort than when one loses a spouse or a child. Paul’s exhortation is that this deep sorrow should not be a stumbling block in their relationship to the Lord.

Conversely, **“those who rejoice, as though they did not rejoice.”** The shortness of life should also temper the Christian’s joys. This danger is inherent in both the life of a single person and those who are married. However, it is easier for those who are married to focus on or pursue these rejoicings, these good times of life, a life of comfort and ease for their family, for the wrong purpose. It is easy for one to fall into the trap of living for the sake of the family rather than for the glory of the Lord. And again, the believer is to live as if they were nearing eternity. In relation to emotions, earthly sorrow is not to be over-grievous and earthly joy is not to be over-joyous.

Paul then gives a second potential distraction, that of possessions. **“And those who buy, as though they did not possess.”** Again, those who are married, particularly the husband, are to provide for their families. To neglect this responsibility would be sin. However, it is easy to get caught up in the pursuit of things for our family rather than for the pursuit of Christ. The pursuit of things can become a preoccupation that distracts us in our walk with the Lord, and this is magnified in the context of marriage. Remembering the shortness of life, and the truth that you cannot take any of these material things with you when you are gone, helps the believer to have a proper perspective on material things. The Christian must always remember to look at earthly possessions as just that, earthly, and a trust from the Lord, not something that is permanent.

Paul’s next potential distraction is the pursuit of pleasure, **“Those who use the world, as though they did not make full use of it.”** The pursuit of pleasure is not evil in and of itself. However, the Christian must not be mastered by these pleasures. We see this pursuit of pleasures born out in a negative way in many marriages today. MacArthur addresses this pointedly, “Pleasures that are not immoral or extravagant may still be worldly. More leisure, more vacation time, earlier retirement, more comfortable homes, and such things can so occupy our interest and time that the things of the Spirit are neglected” [183].

Again, none of these things are inherently bad. Emotions, possessions, and pleasure all have a place when pursued properly. But when any of these things dominate our thought and behavior to the point of distracting us from the Lord’s work, then they are sinful. Paul’s advice is that these things are more likely to become distractions within marriage because one can more easily be preoccupied with these earthly things. So his advice is, if at all possible, to remain single as not to be distracted in their service to the Lord. That is the point that Paul makes in verses 32-35.

His main concern is that they be free from these anxieties associated with marriage. Simply put, the unmarried can focus all of his time, efforts, and attention on the Lord's work (v. 32). The married person is concerned about these things of the world, the emotions, possessions, and pleasures associated with marriage (v. 33). Their interests are divided as to how they might please one another (vv. 33-34).

Then, in v. 35, Paul states his primary concern, the concern that is the focal point of this entire chapter, **"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."** That is the theme of this chapter. Paul's utmost concern was that a person live with **"undistracted devotion to the Lord."** For those who God has granted the gift of singleness, they do not have the same distractions as those who are married which would free them up in their devotion to the Lord. For those who are granted the gift of marriage, understand that God has gifted you to live in a family relationship that is part of your devotion to him and do not allow the responsibilities of marriage distract you in your devotion. Paul's message in this chapter is clear: whether you are married or unmarried, whether you are circumcised or uncircumcised, whether you are slave or free, live every moment focused not on the things of this world that can so easily become distractions and are passing away, but on the things that are above and eternal.

4. Elude the parent's responsibility in marriage (vv. 36-38)

I suppose one of my least liked series I did with the young people at South Woods was a series on dating. I always approached the topic with trepidation because "dating" is so engrained in our culture. However, one of the things I always discussed was the parent's role in this relationship and how dating was really not a scriptural idea at all. You get an idea how popular my lesson was. However, my point was that when we look at Scripture, we do not see the concept of dating, and further, we see the parents deeply involved in arranging pre-marital relationships.

In Jewish culture, the father had the primary role in arranging his daughter's marriage. In New Testament times arranged marriages was the norm and remains so in some Middle East cultures today. But as we have saw in Paul's teaching on divorce in verses 12-16, some believed that to be single brought some special blessing with it. So there were some father's in Corinth who had taken vows to keep their daughter's from marriage. In light of Paul's teaching that their belief was excessive, Paul addresses their quandary. Notice verse 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."** Paul simply states that if a daughter is of marriageable age and has been given the gift of marriage, and as long as her suitor is a believer and also called to marriage, then let her marry. The father would not sin in doing so. Conversely, Paul continues his thought on the gift of singleness and the benefits associated with it in verse 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."** Again, Paul is not discounting the validity of marriage. He is simply restating his belief that, with the benefits of remaining single in their present situation, the father would be wise to continue to protect his daughter from the added burdens of marriage addressed earlier. Again, Paul's teaching is consistent. If one has the gift of singleness, they should remain unmarried. It would be better for them. If not, then they should marry and fulfill their gospel call in that way. So we see Paul's conclusion on this matter in

verse 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.”**

Paul’s point here again is that one of the benefits of remaining single is that a parent, particularly a father, would not have this added burden of arranging his daughter’s marriage, something again that could hinder one’s service to the Lord.

Conclusion

I close this morning with Paul’s conclusion in verses 39-40, **“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. 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 is addressing widows here, but his principle would be the same for widowers. In doing so, he crystallizes the entire chapter. He shows, first of all, the sanctity of marriage as appointed by God all the way back in Genesis 2:24, “For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh.” Paul states it a bit differently, **“A wife is bound as long as her husband lives.”** Marriage is permanent and nothing but death can free one from the marriage union. As Paul noted earlier, while divorce is permitted in certain situations, it is not the Lord’s command.

However, if a spouse dies, Paul reiterates that the survivor is free to marry another believer. In fact, Paul encourages this freedom to young widowers in 1 Timothy 5:14-15, “Therefore, I want younger *widows* to get married, bear children, keep house, *and* give the enemy no occasion for reproach; for some have already turned aside to follow Satan.” Some of these widows had succumbed to their sexual passions and committed adultery. Paul’s advice there, and earlier in this chapter, was that those who were unable to control these passions should marry.

But to those who are able, those who are gifted for singleness, Paul again states that they would be happier to remain as they are given the responsibilities associated with marriage. They would be more content than marrying and encountering these troubles. Perhaps that is why the disciples concluded, “If the relationship of the man with his wife is like this, it is better not to marry” (Matthew 19:20).