

XII. Remaining Content in Any Situation

March 5/7, 2013

1 Corinthians 7:17-40

Aim: To remain content in whatever situation God has called us into, particularly in regard to being either married or single, because our circumstances are under the providential sovereign control of God.

A. Paul's Rule on Remaining Content (1 Cor. 7:17-24)

The key words in this section are 'calling' and 'called' (from *kaleō*), which occur in verses 17, 18 (twice), 20 (twice), 21, 22 (twice), and 24. Paul insists that whatever their station in life, their standing in Christ has rendered social differences irrelevant. To expound the principle, Paul remarks on Jewish circumcision, or the lack of it, and slavery, as opposed to being free. His concern in each case is primarily sociological rather than theological, which accounts for the dispassionate way in which he advances both contrasts.

This passage teaches the basic principle by which Christians should look at and respond to the civil and social conditions in which they live. The principle is this: Christians should willingly accept the situation into which God has placed them and be content to serve Him there. It is a principle against which human nature rebels.

This relatively uncomplicated section is, in fact, the heart and center of this whole chapter. Either side of his central assertion in verse 20 (repeated at the beginning and end of the section in vv. 17 and 24), Paul develops an example. The first is from the religious sphere, concerning circumcision, and the second is social, concerning slavery. Neither of these seems to have been a particularly live or contentious issue in Corinth; indeed, that is probably the very reason why Paul chose them as his examples. As they do not in themselves raise any hackles, he is able to use them illustratively to drive home his main point.

1. One Rule (7:17; cp. vv. 20, 24)

a) *A Simple Principle (7:17a; cp. vv. 20, 24)*

¹⁷Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him.... ²⁰Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called....²⁴So, brothers, in whatever condition each was called, there let him remain with God.

Paul states one principle three times in this passage. It can be put in two simple words: 'Be content!' That is the essence of what Paul says in verses 17, 20, and 24. Paul, of course, knew it wasn't sufficient for him merely to say, 'Be content.' So he puts in this passage three truths to help his readers achieve this elusive goal of contentment, contained in two different examples.

Paul repeats his central statement three times. It is a statement based on the conviction that God's sovereignty extends over all the detailed circumstances of every individual life. God assigns everybody a place in life and calls each one to his particular function.

What is Paul's principle? It is that the circumstances of life – marriage, race, slavery – are as the Lord has 'assigned' and as the Lord 'has called' (*keklēken*). God has called them to faith and also to where He has decided they will earn their bread. They are not to struggle to change their personal circumstances; each believer's vocation has been 'assigned' to him by the Lord.

1 Corinthians – Lesson 12

Therefore, they are obliged to live for Christ where they are, none being at liberty to complain that if his situation were different he would be a better disciple. If, then, God is in control of the Corinthians' lives (cp. 3:22), let them be content with providence even if they do not find themselves as favorably placed as others.

Obviously the apostle is not telling believers to stay in occupations, professions, or habits that are inherently immoral or illegal. A thief was not to keep stealing, a temple priestess was not to continue in prostitution, or a drunkard was not to keep getting drunk. Everything sinful is to be forsaken. The issue has to do with believers being content in the social conditions and situations they are in when saved.

Several areas of discontent were prevalent in the Corinthian church. Some believers wanted to change their marital status – from single to married, from married to single, or from an unbelieving partner to a believing one. Some were slaves and wanted to be free. They had misinterpreted, and often abused, the truth of Christian freedom—taking it to mean freedom to do as they pleased, instead of freedom to do as God pleased.

b) A Universal Principle (7:17b)

This is my rule in all the churches....

‘And thus I order in all the churches’ – ‘order,’ from *diatassomai*, a verb in the middle voice and possibly suggesting personal involvement, is strong. With an eye to upholding his office, Paul teaches his readers both what to believe and how they should behave. This principle is universal. It was not given only to the divided, contentious, and immature Corinthians, but to all the churches. God’s primary purpose for His church in every nation is for them to evangelize, to change the world through spiritual regeneration, not social revolution.

But Christians can be Christians in a dictatorship, a democracy, or even under anarchy. We can be Christians whether we are a man, woman, child, married, single, divorced, Jew, Gentile, slave, or free. We can be Christians in Russia or the United States, in Cuba or China, in France or Japan. Whatever we are and wherever we are, we can be Christians. God does not justify corrupt governments or immoral societies, and they will be judged in His time and in His way. But the purpose of the gospel of His Son Jesus Christ is not to revolutionize social institutions but to revolutionize hearts. The gospel is directed at the human heart, not at human society. Because faithful Christians are better husbands or wives, better friends, better slaves or masters, better sons or daughters, and better citizens, they cannot help contributing to better societies.

‘This is my rule in all the churches’ – that is, the churches of the Gentiles established by him in Galatia, Macedonia, Achaia, and Asia – is an indication of the total historical and geographical relevance of this principle. It is always true for everybody, everywhere, and so the principles derived from it are equally comprehensive in scope and relevance. The circumstances of our personal lives are not accidental – they are laid down by God. Each one finds his or her own special tasks and duties, in keeping God’s commands, within the sphere in which He has placed us, in His infinite wisdom and love.

1 Corinthians – Lesson 12

2. Two Examples (7:18-24)

a) Circumcision (7:18-20)

(1) Remain As You Are (7:18)

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.*

The first truth he urges them to keep in mind is the truth of God's sovereign distribution (vv. 18-18). We talk a lot about luck, accidents, and chance, but Scripture consistently teaches that God is in control of all things and nothing happens apart from His decreeing or permitting it. So as far as the Corinthian's world was concerned, it didn't just happen by chance that Jews were Jews, Gentiles were Gentiles, and slaves were slaves. All of this was under the sovereign control of God.

The first example he takes relates to the issue of circumcision. Paul consistently opposed such irrelevant religious imperialism and these verses show his typical response. Christian Jews should not try to change their status with regard to circumcision, any more than Gentiles needed to.

The problem concerning circumcision was not as serious in Corinth as it was in Galatia, where Judaizers taught that circumcision was necessary for salvation (Gal. 5:2-3). In Corinth the practice may have been viewed as a mark of special dedication and a means of special blessing. But circumcision is not necessary either for salvation or for blessing. It has no spiritual significance or value for Christians at all.

Some always respond to talk of God's sovereign allocation by saying His distribution isn't fair. The assumption behind this objection is that somewhere in the world's archives is a guarantee that life will be minutely fair. The reason so many think this way is that they believe this life is all there is; if someone doesn't get justice here, he will never get it. I don't want to disappoint you, but Scripture reveals that God is more concerned about preparing us for eternity than in making sure we all get through life with the same fair share of everything. If you have trouble accepting the sovereignty of God, think for a while about this: if God isn't in control of every detail, it is sheer folly to talk about trusting Him.

(2) Keep the Commandments (7:19-20)

¹⁹*For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God.* ²⁰*Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called.*

Paul urges against such changes; it just doesn't matter anymore. What does matter is 'keeping the commandments of God' (cp. Gal. 6:15). How foolish for a Christian to devote his energies to worrying about his physical state and seeking to change it, rather than devoting his life to obeying the Lord and so changing his entire character!

Secondly, Paul urges his readers to ponder life's supreme priority (v. 19). God's blessing rests on those who obey Him, whether they be circumcised or uncircumcised, slave or free. Do you want to be blessed of God? Quit worrying about your circumstances and start obeying Him! Isn't it ironic that we often use our circumstances as an excuse for not obeying God when God is the one who gave us those very circumstances so we could obey Him?

1 Corinthians – Lesson 12

Although ‘calling’ usually refers to the sovereign act of the Spirit in drawing men to faith, here ‘calling’ may mean vocation. Let the Corinthian, then, work out his faith, to which he has been called, in his day-to-day ‘calling.’

b) Slavery (7:21-24)

(1) Bondservants of Christ (7:21-22)

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.*

Verses 21-22 take us to the second example, namely, that of slavery. Unlike verse 20, the call mentioned in verse 21 is almost certainly the call to faith. The question accepts that even being a slave is an instance of divine vocation, whence it follows that the Christian bondservant is not to be too concerned about his lowly station, and is not to rankle beneath his burden; it is not impossible for him to live for Christ (cp. Phm. 12).

Paul’s point is not to approve of slavery or to suggest that it is as good a condition to live under as freedom. His point is that, if a person is a slave, he is still able to live a Christian life (cp. Eph. 6:5-8). Even having reaffirmed the principle, Paul makes it clear that he did not consider slavery to be the most desirable state. Paul himself was content to be in jail and serve the Lord as long as he was jailed. He carried on much of his ministry from a jail cell. But when he was freed he left jail.

The Christian slave will not be troubled to the point of distraction over his social circumstances, for they are no longer what matters most to him. The priority by which all Christians, slave or free, must live their lives is their relationship to Jesus Christ as Lord. The distinctions of status in this temporal world are irrelevant in comparison with this eternal relationship. The Christian agenda is not to abolish social differences, but to put them into their proper eternal perspective by transcending them through the gospel, so that they gradually fade away into irrelevance. Those who seek to preserve them simply demonstrate their spiritual immaturity.

As miserable as it was to be a slave, there was nothing about slavery that prevented one from obeying the commands of God. Paul is not categorically opposed to change; he says if the slave received the opportunity to be free, he should certainly seize it; however, if the opportunity never came, he could still serve God. There was nothing about slavery that made obedience to God impossible. So, as far as Christianity is concerned, all Christians (slave or free) are in exactly the same position.

Paul takes the opportunity to give the Corinthians a theological proverb, a wise oracle, based on his practical advice to slaves in verse 22. A ‘freedman’ was a slave who had been set free as opposed to a free man or woman who had not been a slave. Paul is doubtless thinking by name of those from Corinth who had been enslaved to the vices mentioned earlier, but who had been liberated by ‘the name of the Lord Jesus and the Spirit of our God (cp. 6:9-11). But whether a ‘freedman’ spiritually speaking or a ‘free man’ socially speaking, both are to be ‘the slaves of Christ.’

1 Corinthians – Lesson 12

(2) Bondservants of Men (7:23-24)

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.*

This is the second occasion Paul has spoken of the purchase price for freedom having been paid (cp. 6:20). What they must not contemplate is drifting back from their freedom into a bondage to man-made rules and regulations, whether religious or social. Christians are responsible to God first of all (v. 24) and all that really counts is the reality of our relationship with Him.

By his encouragement, ‘Do not become the slaves of men,’ Paul has in mind the real possibility of the redeemed returning to their old vices. He does not mean physical slavery but spiritual slavery. He is speaking of becoming slaves of the ways of men, the ways of the world, the ways of the flesh. That is the slavery into which many of the Corinthian believers had fallen, the slavery that caused their divisions and strife and their immaturity and immorality.

If the Corinthian Christians yielded to the pressures from purely human sources to change their circumstances and situation in life, they would become ‘slaves of men.’ Instead he wants them to stay where they are and keep on obeying God’s commands, so that they might enjoy the only true freedom any human being can have, in recognizing and submitting to Jesus Christ as Lord. The circumstances of life are not the most important things in life. The great priority is that, irrespective of our circumstances, we have been set free, in Christ, to be our true, redeemed selves.

The third and final truth that inevitably produces contentment almost escapes notice in verse 24. Have you ever noticed those two words, ‘with God’ (*para theou*)? Could Paul be suggesting that the very same God who gave the difficult situation is there in the midst of it to help us bear it? How different that makes our circumstances! After giving the burden, our loving Father steps in and helps us shoulder it! That makes the burden much lighter. We place ourselves humbly beneath His mighty fatherly hand, casting our cares on Him in the knowledge that He cares for us and gives us His strength for whatever might be.

Conversion is not the signal for a person to leave his social condition, his marriage, or his singleness, his human master, or his other circumstances. We are to leave sin and anything that encourages sin; but otherwise we are to stay where we are until God moves us.

B. Paul’s Advice to the Betrothed (1 Cor. 7:25-40)

In the second half of the chapter, Paul turns his attention to those who were contemplating marriage. Between the two withering phrases of verses 25 and 40, Paul takes up the concerns of three groups of people associated with the question of whether those contemplating marriage should follow through. In verses 25-35, he addresses the ‘virgins,’ or those who had never married. In verses 36-38, he addresses the fathers who were responsible for arranging marriages. In verses 39-40, he addresses widows.

Once again, Paul’s concern shifts to different groups within the Corinthian congregation, but he never moves far from the central, guiding principal of verses 17-24, ‘Stay as you are!’ The particular issue of the ‘betrothed’ or ‘virgins’ probably reflected the situation found in the culture of the first century, where the decision of a single woman’s parent or guardian, on whom she would be dependent for support, determined whether or not she was allowed to marry. The men (fathers, and perhaps fiancés too – see v. 36) seem to have asked Paul’s advice on whether they

1 Corinthians – Lesson 12

should plan marriages for their children, whether engaged couples were committed to one another, and whether Christian widows were at liberty to marry again.

1. Advice on Marriage (7:25-35)

The first of these three sections is by far the longest. The reason is that Paul packs into this section what all three groups should think about in making their respective decisions concerning marriage. In other words, Paul intended the fathers and the widows to make their decisions with his instructions to the unmarried in mind. He had to add only a word or two for their special situations.

What, then, is the essence of Paul's teaching in this passage? It is that those who are contemplating marriage should carefully think about certain realities before proceeding.

a) *The Trustworthy Advisor (7:25)*

²⁵*Now concerning the betrothed, I have no command from the Lord, but I give my judgment as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy.*

Throughout the letter, the phrase 'Now concerning (*peri de*)...' is used to indicate a change of subject matter, but probably also to introduce and deal with various issues the Corinthians have raised with the apostle. Paul is now moving on to the next item in their letter seeking answers from him. The question came from fathers about their as-yet unmarried daughters, whose marriages it fell to them to arrange. 'Paul, should we or should we not betroth our daughters?' The word used for 'betrothed' or 'maidens' indicates that they are virgins, that is, never before married.

Paul has no 'command' from the Lord on this matter. By this he means that he has received no instruction from his Master about such individuals. Also, he seems to acknowledge that when the Lord was on earth, Jesus did not address this type of situation. His care in distinguishing the words of Jesus from his own words fill us with encouragement about the integrity of the words of Jesus we find in this Epistle and the Gospels.

However, in giving his 'judgment' or 'opinion' (*gnōmē*, 'judgment, consideration, and conviction') no lack of authority over the Corinthians is thereby conceded. He is aware that Christ is speaking through him and that he, as one who has been the object of divine compassion, will accurately reflect the mind of the Lord. As a 'trustworthy' apostle, Paul's conviction was that it is better for single Christians to remain single if they have the gift from God.

Yet why does he say it is an 'opinion,' and not an instruction? It may be that Paul is being tactful in order to deflect the arrogance of those intent on raking up circumstantial evidence to show that he always wants his own way. If so, he employs irony to appeal to the Corinthians to agree with him: after all, the Lord has not found him unreliable. Secondly, in that marriage and the single state are voluntary, Paul, following the precedent set by Jesus, will not command.

Paul opens and closes this long section by taking a couple of potshots at the spiritual snobs who had created all the confusion in Corinth. Unlike the spiritual snobs, Paul would claim no special revelation in deciding between alternatives when neither one is sinful (v. 25). The closing phrase in verse 40 ('and I think that I too have the Spirit of God') is heavy with sarcasm. Paul suggests the self-appointed receivers of special revelations allow the possibility that others might also have the Spirit of God. This amounted to a crushing word in the light of the fact that it came from one of the hand-picked apostles of the Lord Jesus Christ.

1 Corinthians – Lesson 12

b) *The Present Distress* (7:26-27)

²⁶I think that in view of the present distress it is good for a person to remain as he is. ²⁷Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife.

Paul's basic answer is in verse 26. Once more Paul is urging his readers not to change their 'calling.' The use of 'good' here matches the Corinthians' use of the same word in verse 1. It does not carry an absolute moral sense of good as opposed to evil but rather the sense of a wise or expedient course of action. The word 'person' means an individual whether male or female, all being targeted by Paul's counsel; and 'as he is' translates *houtōs*, 'just so.'

Although Paul's perspective is authoritative, it is not given as an absolute or as a command. It is an authoritative guideline, thoroughly dependable advice, and is twice stated in verse 26 to be 'good.' Paul and the Lord are saying that singleness makes good sense.

The first reason Paul gives for remaining single is the pressure of the system, the world situation of that day, which he called 'the present distress.' *Anankē* ('distress') means 'a stress, calamity' or sometimes 'the means of calamity' (such as torture or violence). Some suggest that the reference is to the violent conflict between the new creation in Christ and the old cosmos, the world system.

One thing all should ask themselves is whether there are any special crises that would put an unusual strain upon the marriage. By citing 'the present distress,' Paul was probably referring to the cloud of persecution of Christians that was already building on the horizon and that finally broke in all its fury during the reign of Nero. The only thing that could make the sufferings of a Christian worse was to know he was leaving a wife and children in the midst of such distress or, worse still, to see them tortured.

Persecution is difficult enough for a single person, but the problems and pain are multiplied for one who is married. If Paul had been married, his suffering would have been magnified by his worry about his family and knowledge of their worry about him. They would have suffered every time he was beaten or stoned or imprisoned and would have been constantly fearful for his life. Married believers who go through social turmoil and persecution cannot escape carrying a much heavier load than those who are single.

Many suggestions have been offered to explain the reference to 'the present distress,' including the occurrence of sexual immorality in the Corinthian church; the imminence of persecution; of the fact that the church is to view itself as living in the last days, suspended between two comings of Christ. There was a shortage of food in the eastern Mediterranean due to the protracted famine which began in the late forties and whose effects were felt for many years. Another problem, local to Corinth, was Claudius' creation of an Imperial Cult in Corinth in AD 54 which must have placed considerable pressure on Christians to offer public worship to the gods. Evidence from the present letter suggests that the 'present crisis' was related to a spate of recent illnesses and *not a few* deaths within the congregation (cp. 11:30). Food shortage, social unrest, and disease probably combined to create a 'crisis' that had struck Corinth at the time Paul wrote this letter. Regardless of what the crisis was, Paul pleads, 'Do not make a change for change's sake.'

In verse 27, the related Greek noun *lysis* and verb *lelytai* in, respectively, 'Do not seek *release*' and 'Are you *released* from a woman?' signify the cutting of a bond. Paul's assumption is that a dissolution of the marital tie does not occur at death; rather the two partners leave each other to

1 Corinthians – Lesson 12

go their separate ways. Nowhere in the Bible does ‘released’ mean the conclusion of a marriage through the decease of husband or wife.

Paul is referring to the practice of betrothal where two fathers arranged the marriage between a son and a daughter. Paul is encouraging a ‘stay as you are’ attitude, whether to the already betrothed or to the not yet betrothed.

c) *The Cares of Life (7:28)*

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.*

The concession at the beginning of verse 28 qualifies verse 27, showing that Paul again offers no more than authoritative counsel. If a man remarries, it will not necessarily be wrong. Paul again makes it clear that it is not a sin for single believers to get married, as long as it is to another believer (v. 39; cp. 2 Cor. 6:14). The point is that marriage is a legitimate option, but it is good to consider first the option of singleness.

It is clear once again that the apostle is giving practical advice, not a moral or spiritual command (‘I would spare you’ worldly troubles). Even if there is no special crisis to consider, there are certain general cares that always have to be considered by those contemplating marriage. The special crisis only occurs from time to time, but the general cares of life are with us at all times. First among these is what Paul calls ‘troubles in the flesh.’

‘Trouble’ (*thlipsis*) literally means ‘pressed together or under pressure.’ Marriage presses people together in the closest possible ways. It is not that marriage is not rewarding, or that family life is uninterrupted trouble. A loving, devoted, spiritual family not only is a great joy and strength to its members but also strengthens and blesses those around it. Paul is simply pointing out that marriage may cause some problems while it solves others. It is not intended by God to resolve all personal, emotional, or spiritual difficulties. It definitely intensifies some of them.

Marriage is one of God’s most precious gifts. As such, it brings great joys and delights, but that doesn’t mean it is easy. The single life is a much simpler life because the single person doesn’t have to adjust to, or sacrifice for another person. As wonderful as marriage is, it is still a matter of two sinners living together, which always creates a certain amount of misunderstanding and conflict. And yet, there is no question of sin either in marrying or not marrying for the man or the woman.

d) *The Time Is Short (7:29-31)*

(1) The Timeframe (7:29a, 31b)

²⁹*This is what I mean, brothers: the appointed time has grown very short....* ³¹*For the present form of this world is passing away.*

Another item on the list of the general cares of life is the shortness of life. Paul uses two phrases to convey this: ‘the time is short’ (v. 29), and ‘the form of this world is passing away’ (v. 31).

The ‘time’ (*kairos*) refers to a definite period, a fixed, appointed time; and that period ‘has been shortened,’ or drawn together so that it is a small amount. Human life at its longest is brief (cp. James 4:14; 1 Pet. 1:24; Is. 40:6-8). In speaking of a ‘time’ or ‘season’ (*kairos*), Paul probably has in mind the vexed seasons through which the churches travel in this world. Our problem is that we are tempted to live as though this world is the ultimate reality and is going to last forever.

1 Corinthians – Lesson 12

Paul is saying that all believers are to be people of the *future*. Our attitudes to this world are to be informed by our hope for a glory-laden future and are not to be negative *per se* about life here and now.

‘Form’ (*schēma*) means ‘fashion, manner of life, way of doing things, or mode of existence.’ It is the appearance of a thing as it really is (cp. Phil. 2:7). The mode of the world is impermanence; it is ‘passing away.’ Because this world fades, nothing is to be gained by being hyper-enthusiastic about joys that take their leave and by becoming emotional invalids because of sadnesses destined to vanish. Although God-ordained and blessed, marriage is not an eternal relationship; it too will pass away (Mt. 22:30).

(2) The Mindset (7:29b-31a)

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.

In verses 29-31 Paul offers a set of contrasts between this age and the coming age. These words seem to be prophetic of the reversal of circumstances when the Kingdom of God appears. Behind Paul’s poetic words is his realistic and straightforward reminder that our ‘calling’ in this life will be radically different in the Kingdom:

‘The time is shortened, henceforth:

those who have wives will be as those who do not [have wives],
those who weep as those who do not weep,
those who rejoice as those who do not rejoice,
those who buy as those who have nothing,
those who use this world as those who do not.

For the outward form of this world is passing away.’

Verse 29b has been greatly abused over the years by men that have been unwilling to shoulder their proper responsibilities in marriage! What is Paul saying? Simply that those who are married recognized that it cannot be forever; they do not build their whole lives on their marriage, because death will end it, and marriage is not part of the new creation (cp. Mt. 22:29-30). It is a wonderful gift of God for *this* world, but therefore, by definition, transient. Marriage lasts only for life, and is therefore as brief as life. Yet a brief life and hard circumstances do not lessen the obligations of husbands and wives.

As in verses 30 and 31, Paul’s statement in verse 29 is rhetorical, and is not to be taken literally. His meaning is that Corinthian married men are to honor their unions, yet not consider marriage and family life as the substance of their existence. Their gaze ought to rest upon God in Christ, who has limited their time and who will soon usher in another order of being.

In addition to marriage, Paul gives four other areas in which priorities and perspectives must be kept right. The second and third areas have to do with the emotions of sorrow and joy. The fourth area of concern is that of finances and possessions. The fifth area of concern is that of pleasure. None of the five areas about which Paul warns is inherently bad. Marriage, sorrow, rejoicing, possessions, and pleasure all have a proper place in the Christian life. In fact, each is a part of God’s provision for life here. But human relationships, emotions, possessions, and pleasures become sinful when they dominate thought and behavior, and especially when they

1 Corinthians – Lesson 12

detract us from the Lord's work. We should not overvalue these things, knowing that they are 'passing away.'

The brevity of this life is an important consideration for every aspect of life, not just for marriage only. It should really color the Christian's approach to, and outlook on, everything.' First, it should sweeten his *sorrows*. When his heart is broken with a keen loss, the Christian shouldn't think it is nothing, but in the light of eternity, he should be able to see it is less than what it appears to be. The shortness of life should also temper the Christian's *joys*. Thank God, there is much for the Christian to enjoy in this life, but the knowledge that life is brief prevents him from living excessively for those joys. The impermanence of this life should also color the Christian's view of *possessions*. The Christian is free to use the things of this world, but he is not to become so engrossed in them that he forgets he is a pilgrim here and his real treasure is elsewhere. Finally, the swiftness of life should color the Christian's view of *pleasures*. The Christian, according to Paul, should use the world without abusing it (v. 31). The Christian can legitimately engage in pleasures, but he must not be mastered by them.

Neither tears nor laughter are a permanent state; they are transient emotions in a transient world. We all love to be happy, but to build one's life solely on that basis is total self-centeredness and would ultimately disqualify oneself from ever attaining such a goal. Things we own and use, trade and commerce, professional and social relationships, are all part of the world as created and given to us by God in His goodness, but they are not ours to keep and we are not to be engrossed by them. If we are, we shall end up worshipping and serving created things rather than the Creator, and to do so is to exchange the truth of God for a lie (Rom. 1:25). Christians are not to be absorbed by this world, because they know it has no permanence and can provide no lasting satisfaction. Applying this to the main theme of the chapter, we can say that the single Christian is not to become fretful, anxious, or frustrated, because he or she is not yet married. We have been set free from the idolatry of sex and marriage, in order to use God's greatest gifts in the gospel to His glory.

e) The Demands of Marriage (7:32-35)

(1) The Cares of Marriage (7:32-34)

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. ³³But the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife, ³⁴and 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.*

Having compared this world to the next, Paul now contrasts the circumstances of the unmarried man with the married man. In doing so, he does not differentiate between married men and women. Inevitably both are occupied with the needs of the partner, physical, spiritual, and emotional. Paul expresses his desire that his unmarried readers 'be free from care' (*amerimnos*; cp. Mt. 28:14), released from the worries attendant upon married life.

There is one more general concern that should be considered before embarking on the sea of matrimony: the demands marriage makes upon one's time and energy. Marriage, by its very nature, divides one's attention. In addition to serving the Lord, the married Christian has the responsibility of pleasing his or her spouse. The single person, on the other hand, is free to devote him or herself entirely to the Lord.

1 Corinthians – Lesson 12

(2) The Benefit of Singleness (7:35)

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.*

Although Paul's words are designed for the Corinthians' 'benefit,' he advises rather than commands. Nor does he write in order to throw a 'noose' (*brochos*) around them, tying them up to be led towards the single state. Because they are free, neither are they necessarily to remain single nor are they under compulsion to marry.

Although Paul has the 'gift' of singleness, it is not based on an ascetical denial of this world, but rather on his longing for the Kingdom of God and his passionate desire to 'please the Lord' and to be 'devoted to Him without distraction.'

Marriage does not prevent great devotion to the Lord, and singleness does not guarantee it. But singleness has fewer hindrances and more advantages. It is easier for a single person to be single-minded in the things of the Lord. The married Christian has no choice. His interests *must* be divided. He cannot be faithful to the Lord if he is unfaithful to his family. The single person, however, has a choice. He is free to marry or not. He is not under 'restraint' to remain single. His choice is not between right and wrong but between good and better. Paul was not putting a legalistic noose (the literal meaning of 'restraint') around the necks of single Christians.

Paul is not denigrating marriage to a second best, any more than he writes off singleness. He wants his readers to see the benefits of both states – each a gracious gift from God – and to use their passing opportunities for eternal benefit.

We need to encourage younger Christians to see the potential of giving some of the most energetic years of their life to the service of God, instead of drifting through a series of 'relationships' with the aim of getting married as soon as possible. Some will get married early, as God's *charisma* ('gift') to them, but if that gift does not come, the alternative gift of singleness has great potential for gospel work. Churches everywhere need the dedicated service of undistracted singles, who are not divided by other pressures and considerations.

In summary, Paul has given many reasons for not marrying but rather remaining in the single state: 1) for some it is a *charisma* not to be disdained (7:7); 2) it is appropriate for the impending distress (7:26); 3) marriage can bring trouble for the flesh (7:28); 4) matrimony is temporary (7:31); and 5) single people are released from the worries attendant upon married life (7:32).

The point that Paul makes is that because this world must end, being married or being single are not issues which should dominate the heart. If a believer is married or is convinced that he should marry, matrimony will be 'seemly' for him, providing ample opportunity for personal commitment to the Lord. He need not suspect that marriage must be wrong. Similarly, a single person who does not intend to wed can rest assured that being single is no less appropriate; he may consider himself absolved from any misgiving that he is missing out or has erred.

2. Advice to Fathers (7:36-38)

³⁶*If anyone thinks that he is not behaving properly toward his betrothed, if his passions are strong, and it has to be, let him do as he wishes: let them marry—it is no sin.* ³⁷*But whoever is firmly established in his heart, being under no necessity but having his desire under control, and*

1 Corinthians – Lesson 12

has determined this in his heart, to keep her as his betrothed, he will do well. ³⁸So then he who marries his betrothed does well, and he who refrains from marriage will do even better.

The concluding paragraph (vv. 36-40) poses some challenges for the translators. In a nutshell, the issue is whether the ‘anyone’ of verse 36 is a father (guardian) or a fiancé. In either case, Paul says that individuals have freedom to choose in the areas of marriage and singleness, and that either choice may be right.

‘His maiden,’ rather than ‘his daughter,’ repeated three times in these verses, may be introduced to draw attention to the preciousness of the bond between father and daughter, emphasis being placed upon the vulnerability of the latter. The phrase translated ‘if his passions are strong’ could also refer to the young lady as ‘fully developed’ (*hyperakmos* – surpassing in vigor or bloom).

In the Corinthians’ culture, fathers had the primary role in arranging the marriages of their daughters. It appears some of the fathers in Corinth had become so thoroughly convinced of the superiority of singleness that they had determined their young daughters would remain single. Some of these daughters had now reached marriageable age and those fathers were evidently wondering whether they should stand by their decision or proceed to arrange marriages for their daughters.

In light of the extant teaching about the advantages of singleness, some of the fathers in Corinth apparently had dedicated their young daughters to the Lord as permanent virgins. But when the daughters became of marriageable age, many of them no doubt wanted to be married, and their fathers were in a quandary. Should they break the vow they made for the girl? It is likely that many of the girls did not have the gift of singleness and were struggling with their desire to get married and their desire to please their fathers and the Lord.

Apparently a father from the congregation has expressed concern that in barring the way for the marriage of a daughter who is somewhat older than the norm he may have acted in an ‘unseemly’ way. Apparently the man feels obligated by undertakings already made to the other father. ‘If it has to be’ indicates that she is really designed for marriage, and the father should allow it. Paul’s attitude is clear and compassionate. ‘Whatever he decides to do, let him do it. He has not sinned. Let them marry.’ The father will not sin if he assumes the mantle of father-in-law.

On the other hand, if the man has decided not to proceed with the betrothal through to a marriage, that also is a valid course of action. Paul in this case is considering the situation of a father who is aware that there is no compelling reason for his girl to marry. Therefore, let him withhold permission. In practical terms, what might bring him to say ‘no’ is left to the imagination of the reader. In effect, a compliment is paid to the father who reaches an affectionate decision to keep his daughter rather than deliver her to another man’s care. But in the end, Paul leaves the decision to the man.

Paul responds by saying these fathers would not be committing sin if they provided for their daughter’s marriage. Alternately, they could stay with their original decision. Paul’s stance is consistent throughout his discussion of marriage. Singleness is good if one has the gift of singleness, but if someone doesn’t have that gift he should feel free to marry. In sum, Paul’s counsel is timeless: a father must never assume that it is part of his duty to see his daughter ‘married off’ and that if she remains unwed, he has failed her.

1 Corinthians – Lesson 12

3. Advice to Widows (7:39-40)

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.*

The marriage relationship is not permanent in the sense of being eternal but in the sense of being lifelong. It is binding as long as both partners are alive. Although Christians with the gift of singleness are free to get married, they should keep in mind that they are bound for the rest of their lives if they should die before their partners. The particular advice here is to widows, but it applies also to widowers.

Clearly the widow was formerly married to a believer; only believers are said to ‘fall asleep.’ Unbelievers are said to die rather than slumber. A Christian widow is entirely at liberty to remarry but only within the circle of membership of the community of faith. Paul asserts by direct implication that a union between a Christian widow and an unbeliever is wrong. These words reach beyond widows in their application. If one is already a Christian, he or she is not free to marry outside the Lord.

To the widows, Paul says essentially the same thing: if they feel the calling to remain single they will find there is a definite happiness there. If they do not have that calling, they are entirely free to marry with one condition: they must marry another believer! Paul makes it clear that the matter of whether to remarry or not is not a command, but counsel for the benefit and blessing of those who take it: ‘in my opinion she is happier if she remains as she is.’

Paul has the last word on this matter in terms of his own preference for singleness. Paul adds, ‘I think that I also have the Spirit of God’ in giving this advice. Here he is appealing to his apostolic insight into the mind of the Lord, to which he referred earlier (cp. 2:11-16). His appeal is probably sardonic: Paul protests that he, no less than certain Corinthians who supposed that they are spiritual (cp. 1:7), does discern the will of God in such a sensitive area.

This ‘postscript’ to chapter 7 is possibly a window opened by Paul to allow readers other than the Corinthians to peer in and gauge the turbulence within that church. It may be inferred that a number in the congregation had few reservations about marrying idolatrous unbelievers, and that serving Christ wholeheartedly was not a priority.

We have freedom in Christ and our choices, naturally, will vary. So, Christians are not to sit in judgment on one another, but to respect one another’s liberty, within the sovereign will of God as revealed in Scripture.

Marriage is good, but it isn’t easy. Special crises can make marriage unwise, and general cares always make marriage challenging. Paul’s instruction shows us that our marriages are not independent little domains in which we are free to work our wills, but they also come under the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

For next time: Read 1 Corinthians 8:1-13.