

There are at least three things to remember from the historical context of this epistle that will help unravel the difficult parts of this chapter.

1. Corinth was very loose, morally. In fact, to be called “Corinthian” in those days was to have the reputation of being a sexual libertine; one who lived without restraint. The Greeks also taught that the body was the source of evil, as they defined evil. Because of this, the body was nothing, and ultimate peace would be attained when man is delivered from the body. These two ideas are not as contradictory as they may appear at first glance. The practical outgrowth of these ideas was that salvation came, not by restraint of the body, but by escape from it. The pervasive sexual immorality of Corinth had affected the church, and led to Paul’s strong statements concerning fornication that we find in Chapter Six. Our bodies are not given to us for fornication, but we are members of Christ; how can I be joined to an harlot.
2. There was a Jewish colony at Corinth, influential in the church, that taught that it was a person’s duty to be married—that it was sinful not to be married.
3. The church was under persecution. There was no advantage, materially, to be a Christian in the first three hundred years of Christianity, but Christians lived under the daily threat of arrest, confiscation of property, beatings, imprisonment, exile, or death. We must keep this in mind as we read the New Testament.

But let us look at the words. There is a great deal to be learned from this passage.

Vs. 1. He is answering questions that they had sent. “It is good” It might be a good choice for you in this present distress—vs. 26. Not an absolute good; not a higher good; simply a good practical choice.

Vs. 2. But do not put upon yourself more than you can bear: Marriage was instituted in the Garden of Eden as a great gift to man, for him to live in fellowship and companionship with his own wife; After the fall, marriage had another purpose: to avoid fornication: sexual sin. Marriage is the proper and sanctified and God-appointed outlet for man’s sexuality.

Vs. 3-5. In marriage the man belongs to the woman, and the woman to the man, for we are one flesh. There was great wickedness in the middle ages for the church to defraud men of their wives and wives of their husbands, in the name of devotion to God, for Paul says that such should be only for a time; just as a man might fast in order to “school” himself [that is the word in verse 5] [As a school was supposed to be a place where other things were laid aside in order to concentrate on studies], so when a person fasts and prays in times of great distress or for great decisions, he may give up other things in order to concentrate on the matter before him.

Vs. 6-9. “I speak this by permission” I am not commanding you to either be married or not to be married; the choice is a free one on your part; Some may choose not to be married because of present conditions; others may choose to be married. It is completely up to you, but be sure that if you choose not to be married that you consider your own gifts from God, and not throw yourself in the way of lust and temptation. It is better to marry than to burn with lust and wicked desire. The desire is natural and not evil in itself, except that in our fallen nature it tends toward lawlessness and evil and resists restraint. If God has not given you the gift of celibacy, even in this time of great distress, then it is better to marry, though marriage will bring great troubles because of the times you live in. This passage is not applicable to us today, because we do not endure the persecutions and distresses that they did, so we are not faced with this choice. The normal thing for the modern person to do is to marry, for that is to be our normal condition.

Vs. 10,11. Having said that marriage might be a disadvantage because of the present conditions, this does not mean that those who are married are to separate—the husband is not to put away his wife; and the wife is not to depart from her husband. Paul is answering a specific question concerning separation. Marriage is an institution defined by God and it is a bond that is not to be severed by light and frivolous causes, or even serious causes like the distress of persecution. But the Bible is a practical book, and recognizes that people do not always live by the rule: what if a woman departs—because of her own weakness, or the stupidity or cruelty of her husband? They are to remain unmarried, for the bond of marriage cannot be lightly broken. Paul does not speak of the sins of fornication or adultery; it is assumed that there is no valid grounds here that would ordinarily make divorce legal. There are a number of issues in the matter of divorce and Paul is not dealing with them; only with the question that was asked. Notice how wisely Paul avoids the rocks. He does not say it is sinful to marry; nor does he say that the single life is morally better; nor does he say that the married life is better; he avoids the extremes of both the Jews and the Greeks, recognizing man’s sinful condition, and the remedy that God has provided. He also affirms the sanctity of the marriage vow, but does not make the marriage vow absolute, as though it should rule every other consideration, as we shall see as we proceed through this chapter.

Vs.12-16. The special case of marriage with an unbeliever.

1. What “I speak, not the Lord.” Paul does not deny inspiration; what he is saying is that he is not quoting the Law of God, for the Law of God was for the covenant people, and the mixed marriage is an anomaly. The Law of God does not consider what to do in the case of mixed marriages, because they were forbidden. In the cases in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah, when Israel had contracted such forbidden marriages, they were required to put them away, to repent of their disobedience, and the marriages were illegal. Would such, apply to the church. Paul says no.
2. In the New Testament, however, there is a new condition. The marriage he speaks of were legally contracted and not sinful. The case of Ezra and Nehemiah would not apply. Here is a pagan couple, married legally. One of them becomes a Christian, the other does not. What is the Christian to do?
3. The Christian is not to deny his Lord. If the unbeliever wants to stay and live with a Christian, then the divorce will not take place. If the unbeliever wants to leave, then the person is free to go, and the believer is under to obligation [bondage]. The divorce is legal, and the persons are free to marry again. We are called to peace, not to endless wrangling. If the unbeliever wants to go, he is free to go, and the Christian is free. But the believer may not initiate the proceedings.
4. The idea that the believer is in an unclean marriage in such cases is not the case, Paul says. The believer sanctifies the unbeliever, so that the marriage is clean, and the children are clean. This does not mean saved, but ceremonially clean. This means that the children may be baptized and received as members of the church, as would be the case for the children of two believers. This is all this says. Just as Abraham’s seed was holy because he was holy, so are the children of believers holy—even if one partner is not a believer. The unbelief of one cannot pollute the faith of another; rather the faith of one sanctifies the unbelief of the other. Grace abounds more than sin. Very powerful indeed is the effect of faith. This does not mean that if a person deliberately contracts marriage with an unbeliever that she will escape chastening; for this passage deals with the case of people already married; there are other passages that deal with how we are to choose our mates.
5. If you are in such a marriage: you should look not to your own comfort or your own pleasure, but to the good of your unbelieving mate. Who knows the secret will of God. Maybe by your faith, you will win your partner to Christ. How do you know that they are not elect? You must consider that God has put you in this place in your life to be a witness for Him, to glorify the name of Christ, and seek to win your mate to the Lord, by your submission to God and your gracious be-

havior. If the unbeliever wants to stay, then that ought to be a great encouragement to you that God has given him some light, for it is no small thing to be willing to live with a believer. Your good conduct might therefore lead the person to Christ, building on the goodwill that the unbeliever has for you.

Vs. 17-19. Everyman has a different set of circumstances that God has given him. The same rule applies to national identity. If a Jew becomes a Christian, he is to not cease from being a Jew. If a Gentile becomes a Christian, he is not to cease from being a Gentile. Circumcision in itself is nothing—of course, for a Jew to become a Christian, he must recognize this as Paul recounts in Philippians 3:8, but what circumcision represented was the keeping of God’s commandments. Both Jew and Gentiles are subject to the one rule of God’s will, but this doesn’t mean that the distinctions between Jew and Gentile are to be rubbed out.

We are to keep before us the great issue of our life: Christ is all. We are to conduct ourselves in terms of peace and love, and not make issues where no issues are to be made. We are to seek peace with all men. If I am converted as a pagan, I am not to make my Christianity an issue in my marriage. If I am converted as a Jew, I am not to make Jewish-ness the issue. We are not to raise issues that are indifferent.

God has called you within a set of circumstances. You are not to use your faith as a means of driving a wedge between you and others. The believer is not to raise the issue with his marriage partner; if they are content to live with you, then thank God and be a good witness for Christ, thanking God that you have an opportunity to show the love of Christ to them.