

## 1 Corinthians 7:17-40

### “Married Or Single; Serve The Lord”

Beginning in Ch 7, Paul the apostle is resolving issues revolving around Corinthian confusion. – What we have are *his answers*, what we don't have are *their questions*. They had written him a letter because they had questions, evidently revolving around married life, single life, sexual intimacy & spirituality.

Questions like, “If sex is so closely identified w/sin, should we just avoid it altogether? Am I purer, or more holy if I abstain?” So Paul qualified it; “If you're single, avoid it. If you're married, enjoy it.” If you're single it's sin, if you're married it's sanctified. In the book of Hebrews, we read it like this, “*Marriage is honorable among all, and the bed undefiled; but fornicators and adulterers God will judge.*”<sup>1</sup> & We don't have time to revisit all the “How to (s)?” & “Why for (s)?” But scripture makes God's position on such matters abundantly, unmistakably/unquestionably clear.

They had questions like, “I just got saved, but my spouse didn't. Should I leave him (or her)? Could I serve or please God more effectively apart from them?” Paul said, “No, if they're willing to stay w/you, then stay w/them. God's blessing will be upon *them on your behalf!* & If there are children involved, you provide a covering for them spiritually that otherwise wouldn't be there. – If they leave you, then you can let them leave, other than that stay put, God might use you to lead them to Him.”

But the basic idea in play is, “Am I more pleasing to God if I'm married or unmarried? Or w/in the context of either of those, what kind of *lifestyle* is more pleasing or most advantageous to serving the Lord?” So Paul addresses those kinds of questions & then we pick it up here in Vs 17.

### Vs 17

This is Paul's basic summary answer (or overarching principle) to all their above questions. If you're married, if you're single, live as you're called. Don't be engaging in the prerogatives of marriage relationships if you're single, & don't be neglecting your marital responsibilities if you're married! Seems simple & straightforward enough, doesn't it?

“As the Lord has called each one, so let him walk.” If you're married, if you're single, if you're widowed or divorced... God wants to work in your life, right where you're at! & The application of this has a very broad stroke, but as it pertains to marriage & singleness, the idea is, “Don't wait till something changes to walk w/the Lord or be on fire for Jesus, serve Him w/all your heart right now!”

<sup>1</sup> [The New King James Version](#). (1982). (Heb 13:4) Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

We touched on the “greener grass” trap last week. “If I were only married, then I could really serve the Lord! I’d be on fire for Jesus.” “If I were only single, man, nothing could hold me back...” Listen Mr. (or Mrs.) “If things were different then I would...” **God was well able to get your attention when you were single, or (if you’re single) He could’ve waited until after you were married! Don’t 2<sup>nd</sup> guess your station in life, don’t focus on that “if this, then that” carrot that’s dangling out in front of your nose, just serve God & get fired up for Jesus right where you’re at, right now!**

I should also say this; this little practical piece of advice goes a long way in clearing up some confusion that people find themselves in when it comes to relationship knots. It’s not uncommon for someone to get married, get divorced, get married & then give their lives to Christ & wonder (since God hates divorce) if they should leave their 2<sup>nd</sup> spouse & go back to their 1<sup>st</sup>. **I think Paul makes it abundantly clear right here. Serve God when/where He called you. You’re a new creation in Christ. Old things have passed away. Don’t try to undo the past, don’t leave your present spouse & go back to your previous spouse, serve God in the place you’re at right now. The principle in effect here is, “Stay put in the place where God has called you & serve the Lord w/all your heart.”**

### **Vs 18-20**

He reiterates it again, stay put & serve the Lord. Here he just elaborates a bit. He expands or broadens the stroke of application. He says, “Look; if you were circumcised when you became a Christian, that’s great. If you were uncircumcised when you became a Christian, that’s great too! Either one is completely irrelevant w/regard to the covenant you’ve been called to *in Christ*.”

**Now, if you’re not familiar w/the sign of the old covenant under the law, you’ll be confused as you read your N.T. & this ritual of circumcision is brought up over & over again. Essentially, under the law, the sign that you’d entered the Mosaic covenant w/God was circumcision. It was to represent a cutting away of (or being separated from) the life of the flesh. It signified a life set apart to God.**

But under the New Covenant in Christ, your identification as a believer or your consecration to God has nothing to do w/the physical act of circumcision. The motions you go through outwardly, really mean nothing. What takes place inwardly (in your heart) means everything. – That’s why he says, “Circumcision is nothing & uncircumcision is nothing.” To the Galatians he said it this way...

*"For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but faith working through love."*<sup>2</sup>

But his *point* here, really has nothing to do w/circumcision, this is just his example. He's saying that giving your life to Christ doesn't automatically call for a change in your current status. Just remain as you are & serve the Lord. He could've just as easily said, "Being married is nothing & being unmarried is nothing." (Here's the main point. If you take nothing else home today, take hold of this.) "... *keeping the commandments of God is what matters.*" Or another way to understand that, "To focus on my marital status or religious rituals (circumcision, feast days etc) is to focus on peripheral (essentially) irrelevant matters (in the grand scheme of things). My *primary* focus should be on yielding obedience to the word of God." Just study scripture (you can't obey what you don't read or know) & serve the Lord right where you're at & you can trust He'll work out (& address) the peripheral issues in your life.

Jewish/Gentile, doesn't matter. Married/unmarried, doesn't matter. Whatever state you find yourself in when you come to know Jesus, just stay there & serve Him. It's crazy the things that people will try & change about you once you give your life to Christ. "It's really great that you gave your life to Jesus, now you need to wear a suit & tie... Now you need to get a haircut... now you need to quit wearing make-up." Or whatever (add infinitum). Paul is simply saying, "Be who you are in Christ. Jewish/Gentile, married/unmarried... formal/informal, you just focus on obeying God's word."

Vs 21-24

Are you sensing a pattern here? This is the 3<sup>rd</sup> time he's said it, "Let each one remain w/God in the state in which he was called." God didn't call you to change your civil (or social) situation, or even your *cultural* situation (necessarily) He changed your *spiritual* situation. We concern ourselves w/the temporal, the social, the political, God is focused on the *eternal*. – It doesn't mean He's not aware or working in those other things, but His goal is to take you from being dead in sin (& headed for hell) to alive in Christ Jesus (& headed for Heaven). Beyond that, His primary purpose for us doesn't revolve around making us *happy* (as much as we'd like that), His plan is to make us *holy* (to make us like Jesus).

So Paul branches out farther, "We're you called as a slave? Don't worry about it, look to please God right where you're at."

<sup>2</sup> [The New King James Version](#). (1982). (Ga 5:6). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

In the Roman empire there were literally millions & millions of slaves. They might be teachers, farm workers, overseers in the family or practically anything. But he says, “Don’t think you can’t please God, or serve God because you’re a slave. ‘If I were only free, then I could really serve God.’ You can be a light right where you’re at.” He says, “Now if you can be made free, if you can advance yourself, go for it. But don’t begrudge your situation, serve God from the heart. Be a witness where you’re at.”

I have to admit that I feel a bit like a broken record today (if you know what a record is 😊) but Paul keeps hammering on this nail so we will as well. – Perhaps for you & me we should see it like this; vocational circumstances are of little to no consequence. If God called you while you work in retail, cool, be a Christian retailer, or a teacher, or Dr... If you’re able to advance yourself beyond where you’re at, great! But look for opportunity to serve God & share His love right where you’re at.

In Luke Ch 3 when tax collectors were being baptized & believing on Jesus & asked Him what they should do, He didn’t say, “Well, get out of that line of work, everyone hates tax collectors!” He said, “Be honest w/people & don’t take more than what’s right.” The soldiers asked the same thing. He didn’t say, “Get out of the military because God’s a pacifist.” Because God’s not a pacifist! He just said, “Don’t intimidate people & be content w/your pay.” But having called them while they were there, He was going to use them where they were at!

Now this may go w/out say but I’m gonna say it. As w/anything there are going to be exceptions. – If God called you while a stripper, or a drug dealer, a member of the mafia or something...😊 Prolly oughta go ahead & navigate into a different line of work. But you get the idea.

Your vocation becomes an arena of service to J.C. He’s the One who purchased us w/His own blood, He’s the One whom we serve. That’s why Paul says, “Do not become slaves of men.” Be it physically or spiritually, we don’t follow others blindly. We’re careful to honor the Lord. (You might write it down so you can read it later, Rom 6:16-23).

### Vs 25-28

Here Paul addresses another question. “Now concerning virgins.” (Those who aren’t married). He says, “I have no commandment from the Lord.” Again, he’s not saying, “This is my opinion” in the sense that it’s not the inspired word of God. He’s simply saying that he’s not aware of any teaching from Jesus specifically on this, nor does the law specifically address it, so he’s going to lay out a principle that needs prayerful/careful consideration.

But it's essentially the same, "If you're married, don't look for a loophole to get out. If you're single, don't panic seek a spouse. Just be content as you've been called." But before we get all convinced that Paul just didn't want people to be married (again if you read Eph 5 you'll realize such was not the case) he gives a qualifying factor in his advice here. He says, "Because of the present distress."

We don't know exactly what he's referencing, it would seem the political environment was growing more & more intense & perhaps it was fairly obvious that persecution was headed down the pike for Christians (as history would bear out). Be that as it may, he says, "If you're single, I'd recommend staying that way." Why? #1 You can serve the Lord w/out distraction, w/out worry for your responsibilities toward a family. #2 You might be able to w/stand all kinds of torcher & not renounce Christ. But if someone begins to torcher your children or rape & torcher your wife... That's a whole other level of struggle you're going to be faced with... So he says, "Now may not be the best time to look for a spouse." "However," he says, "It's not sin to get married, & if you desire to, that's fine. Just be aware you may be headed for trouble that I would spare you."

Simultaneously, if you're married, he says, "Don't leave your family, in a time of persecution they need you now more than ever!"

I would also say this w/regard to Vs 28. Marriage consists of 2 imperfect people & therefore *every marriage* will have days of struggle & difficulty. Don't think that marital struggles are unique to yours, matrimony inevitably will bring challenges & it's something you should think through before you say, "I do".

### Vs 29-31

Here's his point, "Don't get distracted, stay focused on serving Jesus." Why? "The time is short." & Let's not think in linear terms, but w/in the scope of eternity. The last days began at the 1<sup>st</sup> coming of Christ & will end at His 2<sup>nd</sup> coming & every day brings us closer to *that* day. Beyond that let me say this. Time is short not only prophetically, but for each of us personally. What is your life? It's even a vapor that appears for a little while & then vanishes away. So again, our focus should be fixed upon the eternal...

"Don't get distracted", Paul says, "by family." Now, invariably there will be some husband out there who reads this & says, "Honey, I'm going out w/the boys, & this weekend I'm taking a fishin trip because the bible says I should live like I have no wife!" 😊 So to state the obvious, Paul wasn't recommending a detachment from responsibility toward your family!

Having said that, sometimes people have mismanaged priorities. “Well, I’d serve here or be in ministry there, but I’m focused on my family.” But some people “focus on their family” to the neglect of kingdom priorities! “Seek 1<sup>st</sup> the kingdom of God!” Lead your family in what it means to serve the Lord, being committed to His word & sacrifice of self. Family can be a distraction (in some cases an idol).

He says, “Those who weep as though they wept not.” Don’t allow emotions, depression, some devastation or tragedy to wreck your ability to serve the Lord. Again, the concept is keeping an eye toward eternity. Same thing on the other end of the spectrum, “Those who rejoice as though they did not rejoice.” Be on guard against pursuing pleasure at the expense of your relationship & service to Christ.

“& Those who use this world at not misusing it.” Don’t allow your business to become your god. Business/finance, many a believer has fallen prey to placing money or the things of this world as a higher priority than serving the Lord... but the form of this world is passing away. Jesus spoke of how, “...*the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things entering in choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful.*”<sup>3</sup> I don’t want my life, or the work of God’s word in my life to become unfruitful because I get distracted & caught up pursuing things that will just pass away w/time when I could be laying up eternal riches/rewards in heaven & making an eternal impact in people’s lives... Yes, we’re *in* the world, but we’re not *of* this world. Let’s not get distracted by the *temporary issues* of this world. Too many people are rich toward themselves, but selfish & stingy in how they contribute (be it time, talent or treasure) to the kingdom of God...

& It’s not that God wants you to be miserable, nothing could be farther from the truth! He wants you to be free. It’s when we seek 1<sup>st</sup> the kingdom that all these other things are added (Matt 6:33). So be about the work of eternity. Maintain your walk with the Lord personally. Serve Him enthusiastically. And you’ll be blessed abundantly.

### Vs 32-35

The 1<sup>st</sup> part of Vs 32 & the last part of Vs 35 will give you the bookends to this section. “I want you to be w/out care (or concern)... that you may serve the Lord w/out distraction.” & Again, he doesn’t have his sights set on downplaying the beauty or the theology of marriage.

<sup>3</sup> [The New King James Version](#). (1982). [Mk 4:19-20]. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.



But “because of the present distress” (Vs 26) he’s urging careful/prayerful consideration before entering into a marriage relationship. Truth be told, such should *always* be the case. – You should realize what you’re getting into. & He’s not saying that being mindful of how you can please your spouse is a bad thing. In fact, it’s a *good* thing. It’s how it *should be*. However, it’s something that will keep you from being able to serve the Lord like you otherwise *could be*.

We talked about this last week. There are pros & cons, pluses & minuses on either side of the fence. That’s why we simply need to be convinced *in* our calling & then be content to serve the Lord to the best of our ability w/in the context *of* that calling.

Paul isn’t trying to put a leash on anyone or bind anyone in some weird way. He’s simply issuing some sanctified common sense for you to pray/think about before deciding one way or another.

### Vs 36-38

Don’t think of improper behavior in a moral sense. The picture here is of a dad & his daughter. In that day, dads arranged marriages for their children. So he’s saying that if you’re feeling like it’s inappropriate to keep her from marriage, she’s all the time, “Daddy, daddy I want to be married!” & You can sense that she doesn’t have the gifting to remain single, then it’s not sin to give her in marriage.

Again, he’s speaking into a context here. There are tough times ahead, if she doesn’t mind being single, that might be best. But there was no need to impose celibacy upon them. If marriage seemed appropriate, then give them in marriage. If keeping them single seemed appropriate, that might be better given the “present distress”.

### Vs 39-40

A final word of exhortation regarding the marriage relationship; “it’s for life” (we’ve already discussed adultery & abandonment by the unbeliever). However, if one spouse dies, the other is then free to remarry... but there is one stipulation. It *must be in the Lord*. In other words, if you’re to honor the Lord, then you can only marry another believer.

He says, “Be open to God calling you into celibacy so that you can serve Him freely. But if you don’t sense that, then marry another Christian.”

I’m not sure it could’ve been put any plainer. Be convinced of your calling (Marriage or singleness) & be content wherever you currently find yourself. Safeguard yourself from distraction & dedicate yourself to serving Jesus...

**Prayer Points:**

God we thank You for the ready reminder to maintain the eternal perspective. It's so easy to become distracted. Be it by family, or emotionally, the pursuit of pleasure or money... Strengthen us that we might prioritize appropriately. Teach us to seeking 1<sup>st</sup> Your kingdom & serve You w/all of our Heart.

Before you can serve the Lord, you really need to belong *to* the Lord. That's why He came. That He might shed His blood on your behalf, paying the penalty for your sin. Now; through faith in Him you can receive the forgiveness of sin & everlasting life in Him.