

THE CHURCH AND MARRIAGE

Up to this point, Paul has been dealing with the report from Chloe regarding divisions over preachers, immorality, and taking lawsuits to pagan courts instead of allowing the church to arbitrate disputes among members.

Chapter 7 deals with matters of marriage and while it may be difficult to answer all the questions that can come up in our “modern” society, the principles set forth are timeless. Many of the problems that arise today in a marriage can be resolved by applying these principles.

1. Marriage and Celibacy

1 Cor 7:1-9

Now concerning the things of which you wrote to me:

It is good for a man not to touch a woman. ² Nevertheless, because of sexual immorality, let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband. ³ Let the husband render to his wife the affection due her, and likewise also the wife to her husband. ⁴ The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband *does*. And likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife *does*. ⁵ Do not deprive one another except with consent for a time, that you may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again so that Satan does not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. ⁶ But I say this as a concession, not as a commandment. ⁷ For I wish that all men were even as I myself. But each one has his own gift from God, one in this manner and another in that.

Is the word in verse 1 “touch” or “marry”?

The Greek word means “to attach oneself to” so either word may be used.

1 Cor 7:1

Now concerning the things of which you wrote to me:

***It is good for a man not to touch a woman.* NKJV, KJV, NASB**

Now for the matters you wrote about: It is good for a man not to marry. NIV

Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman." ESV

The consensus of the translations is “touch” where NIV has “marry.”

The context appears to be “sexual relations” as opposed to celibacy.

In Roman culture celibacy was regarded as a higher level of spirituality.

When Paul says, “It is good for a man not to touch...” he may again be quoting what the Corinthians were saying, or it may be his own personal conclusion.

Paul recommends the unmarried state to those who have the gift of celibacy (which may be his own case) but he speaks highly of marriage and does not forbid it.

Eph 5:22-33

²² Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. ²³ For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body. ²⁴ Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so *let* the wives *be* to their own husbands in everything.

²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, ²⁶ that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, ²⁷ that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish. ²⁸ So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹ For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord *does* the church. ³⁰ For we are members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones. ³¹ *“For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.”* ³² This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church. ³³ Nevertheless let each one of you in particular so love his own wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects *her* husband.

1 Tim 4:1-3

Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, ² speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron, ³ forbidding to marry, *and commanding* to abstain from foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth.

Sex is natural and is part of the created order, yet sex among humans is limited to a man and a woman married to each other.

Paul's brings in marriage because of the problem of fornication that he dealt with previously.

Since the husband and the wife are one flesh, neither has the authority to unilaterally decide to withhold sex from the other. In marriage, in the matter of sex, the wife has the same authority as the husband [4].

It appears that some Christians married couples in the church had decided to become celibate, perhaps from the idea that sex was sinful.

Paul instructs them to be sensitive to each other's sexual needs and to have regular sexual intercourse.

Paul says it is okay to abstain from sex for a limited time, but only by mutual agreement in order to spend more time in prayer [5].

Paul knew that the sexual urge was strong in most people and if it was not satisfied through God-ordained marriage, many would be tempted to find an outlet through sinful means, especially in a sex-oriented culture like Corinth.

Paul is not commanding marriage to those who have the gift of celibacy; but he commands marriage to prevent fornication [6].

In verse 7 Paul indicates that he was unmarried and had the gift of celibacy.

⁸ But I say to the unmarried and to the widows: It is good for them if they remain even as I am; ⁹ but if they cannot exercise self-control, let them marry. For it is better to marry than to burn *with passion*.

Allowing then that Paul was unmarried, either a widower or a bachelor, he prefers this state and recommends it to others. However, he does not insist on either celibacy or marriage. Celibacy is not a state of holiness, but a matter of personal preference. Nothing can be further from the thinking of the Apostle than the misguided spirit that leads to monasteries and convents.

2. Separation and Divorce

1 Cor 7:10-16

¹⁰ Now to the married I command, yet not I but the Lord: A wife is not to depart from *her* husband. ¹¹ But even if she does depart, let her remain unmarried or be reconciled to *her* husband. And a husband is not to divorce *his* wife.

In Corinth there were couples in the church where both the husband and the wife were believers. Also, there were situations where only one of the spouses was a Christian. What to do when one is a believer and the other is not?

First rule: No Divorce!

If Christians separate then no marriage to someone else is allowed so as to leave open the possibility for reconciliation.

When Paul says, "... not I but the Lord..." he is referring to what Jesus taught about divorce.

Matt 5:31-32

³¹ "Furthermore it has been said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' ³² But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife for any reason except sexual immorality [fornication] causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a woman who is divorced commits adultery.

Separation is aimed at reconciliation and no divorce is allowed except for fornication. Fornication effectually dissolves the marriage covenant.

¹² But to the rest I, not the Lord, say: If any brother has a wife who does not believe, and she is willing to live with him, let him not divorce her. ¹³ And a woman who has a husband who does not believe, if he is willing to live with her, let her not divorce him. ¹⁴ For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband; otherwise your children would be unclean, but now they are holy.

Now Paul deals with the situation where one partner in a marriage is a believer and the other is not. Can the believer dissolve the marriage without blame?

Absolutely not! Under no circumstances, except for fornication, can a believer initiate a divorce. Even then there should be an attempt to repent and seek forgiveness and avoid a divorce.

The reason for this is that as long as the marriage can be preserved the believer may influence the unbeliever and the unbeliever may be saved.

To be “sanctified” means that the unbeliever is “set apart” to the influence of the Gospel through the presence of the believing spouse. This cannot mean that the unbeliever is saved apart from their own personal repentance and faith in Jesus Christ.

The mention of children being “sanctified” is an extension of the unbelieving spouse being “sanctified.” Neither the unbelieving spouse nor the unbelieving children can be saved by another’s faith.

The paedobaptist falls into a trap here when they use this passage to support the baptism of infants. If this means you can baptise unbelieving infants then it also means you can baptise the unbelieving spouse based on the faith of the believing spouse.

¹⁵ But if the unbeliever departs, let him depart; a brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases. But God has called us to peace. ¹⁶ For how do you know, O wife, whether you will save *your* husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save *your* wife?

If the unbelieving spouse insists on a divorce is the believer commanded to preserve the marriage? The answer is, “No.”

The believer can accept a divorce initiated by the unbeliever for two reasons:

1. A marriage where one partner wants a divorce is not a peaceful union. And God intends for believers to live in peace.
2. While the believer may hope that the unbeliever will be saved there is no guarantee, “how do you know...?”

There are different interpretations but I think the gist of this teaching is:

If the believer is abandoned and divorced the believer may remarry.

If two believers divorce, except for adultery, they are not permitted to remarry unless they remarry each other.

3. Contentment in God's Calling

1 Cor 7:17-24

17 But as God has distributed to each one, as the Lord has called each one, so let him walk. And so I ordain in all the churches.

The teaching is that in whatever circumstance you find yourself, be content.

Phil 4:10-13

10 But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at last your care for me has flourished again; though you surely did care, but you lacked opportunity. **11** Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: **12** I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. **13** I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

This is the basis for Paul's counsel to the believing spouse not to initiate a divorce from the unbelieving mate.

As an apostle Paul has the authority to apply this rule in all the churches.

18 Was anyone called while circumcised? Let him not become uncircumcised. Was anyone called while uncircumcised? Let him not be circumcised. 19 Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing, but keeping the commandments of God is what matters. 20 Let each one remain in the same calling in which he was called. 21 Were you called while a slave? Do not be concerned about it; but if you can be made free, rather use it. 22 For he who is called in the Lord while a slave is the Lord's freedman. Likewise he who is called while free is Christ's slave.

The same rule applies in all circumstances. If a man is saved as a Jew [circumcised] he should not try to become a Gentile [uncircumcised] and if a man is saved as a Gentile he does not have to become a Jew. This was a major issue in the early church [Cf. Acts 15:1].

Paul says such external matters are of no consequence to God. What matters to God is obedience to His commands regarding a holy life and compassion toward others.

As a general rule the new believer need not try to change his social order, his occupation, or his marital status. An exception may apply if the person's occupation was immoral in and of itself.

This principle even carries over into slavery. Paul is not approving slavery neither is he advocating its overthrow. In a society where slavery is part of the social order, Paul advises to make the best of the situation and be content. If you are a slave, gain your freedom if you can.

Paul wrote a letter to Philemon about Onesimus, a runaway slave, who had been saved, and Paul is sending him back. Paul says to receive Onesimus as a brother in Christ but he doesn't command Philemon to free him.

And believers need to keep in mind we are slaves to Christ.

We are constrained by the love of Christ to watch our conduct.

²³ You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men. ²⁴ Brethren, let each one remain with God in that *state* in which he was called.

The "you" is plural and means the entire church. Believers are accountable to God, not to other men. Therefore, accept the circumstances of your life and be content, because you belong to Christ, bought with a price beyond human valuation, the precious blood of Christ. Cf. 1 Peter 1:18-19

4. The Marriage of Virgins

1 Cor 25-28; 36-38

²⁵ Now concerning virgins: I have no commandment from the Lord; yet I give judgment as one whom the Lord in His mercy *has made* trustworthy. ²⁶ I suppose therefore that this is good because of the present distress – that *it is* good for a man to remain as he is: ²⁷ Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be loosed. Are you loosed from a wife? Do not seek a wife. ²⁸ But even if you do marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned. Nevertheless such will have trouble in the flesh, but I would spare you.

³⁶ But if any man thinks he is behaving improperly toward his virgin, if she is past the flower of youth, and thus it must be, let him do what he wishes. He does not sin; let them marry. ³⁷ Nevertheless he who stands steadfast in his heart, having no necessity, but has power over his own will, and has so determined in his heart that he will keep his virgin, does well. ³⁸ So then he who gives *her* in marriage does well, but he who does not give *her* in marriage does better.

These two passages raise questions that are almost impossible to answer.

Who are the virgins?

What was the “present distress / crisis?”

The commentators offer two views as to who are the virgins: women of marriageable age whose fathers did not want to give permission to marry because of the present distress. Paul says that he does not have a divine command in this matter. Others say the virgins are women betrothed to men who wish to consummate the marriage but are hesitant to do so because of the present crisis.

If either view is correct they both suggest that Paul means that with all of the concerns that come with marriage it is better not to change your status whatever it may be.

This does not appear to be a matter of right and wrong, but Paul advises not to marry at this particular time.

²⁹ But this I say, brethren, the time *is* short, so that from now on even those who have wives should be as though they had none, ³⁰ those who weep as though they did not weep, those who rejoice as though they did not rejoice, those who buy as though they did not possess, ³¹ and those who use this world as not misusing *it*. For the form of this world is passing away.

This may refer to the soon return of Christ and the advice is that you will have fewer problems if you are not married. We are not told what the trouble was at Corinth, perhaps persecution of Christians that Paul anticipated.

Whatever, the concern is based on it is still good advice to not to grasp this present age too tightly because it is passing away.

³² But I want you to be without care. He who is unmarried cares for the things of the Lord – how he may please the Lord. ³³ But he who is married cares about the things of the world – how he may please *his* wife. ³⁴ There is a difference between a wife and a virgin. The unmarried woman cares about the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and in spirit. But she who is married cares about the things of the world – how she may please *her* husband. ³⁵ And this I say for your own profit, not that I may put a leash on you, but for what is proper, and that you may serve the Lord without distraction.

The point is to serve the Lord without distraction and you can't do that if you are overly concerned with pleasing your spouse.

6. The Remarriage of Widows

1 Cor 7:39-40

³⁹ A wife is bound by law as long as her husband lives; but if her husband dies, she is at liberty to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord. ⁴⁰ But she is happier if she remains as she is, according to my judgment – and I think I also have the Spirit of God.

Again Paul suggests singleness is a preferred state for widows but leaves it up the individual to decide.

Two principles are taught:

- 1) Marriage is a lifelong commitment; only death dissolves the marriage covenant.
- 2) A Christian widow is free to marry only a believer