

God's Word for Singles

1 CORINTHIANS 7:17-40

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Over the past two weeks, we have been looking together at God's plan for marriage in 1 Corinthians 7, and we wrap it up today by looking at Paul's inspired advice for those who are not married. As we begin, I thought about sharing some statistics from the world at large, but instead, I just went to our church directory. In our directory right now, we have 48 entries, and of those 48 entries in our directory, if I have counted correctly, exactly 24 represent those who are single or living alone. And as we begin, as we keep this figure in mind (that roughly half of us are single), I also want us to remember who writes this chapter. As we know, Paul himself is not married at the time he writes this letter. And two weeks ago, we got a bit of a preview as to Paul's opinion on this. You might remember from 1 Corinthians 7:8, how Paul says (concerning marriage), ***"But I say to the unmarried and to widows that it is good for them if they remain even as I."*** So, Paul's suggestion is that it is good to remain unmarried, just like he is. He basically repeats this in today's passage, but the point I want to make here at the beginning is that God's word specifically to those who are not married is actually written by a man who is not married. So, this isn't coming from your preacher who has been married for almost 27 years, but instead, this is coming from someone who understands, from someone who is not married himself. Let us please look together at 1 Corinthians 7:17-40,

17 Only, as the Lord has assigned to each one, as God has called each, in this manner let him walk. And so I direct in all the churches. 18 Was any man called when he was already circumcised? He is not to become uncircumcised. Has anyone been called in uncircumcision? He is not to be circumcised. 19 Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but what matters is the keeping of the commandments of God. 20 Each man must remain in that condition in which he was called. 21 Were you called while a slave? Do not worry about it; but if you are able also to become free, rather do that. 22 For he who was called in the Lord while a slave, is the Lord's freedman; likewise he who was called while free, is Christ's slave. 23 You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men. 24 Brethren, each one is to remain with God in that condition in which he was called.

25 Now concerning virgins I have no command of the Lord, but I give an opinion as one who by the mercy of the Lord is trustworthy. 26 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. 27 Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be released. Are you released from a wife? Do not seek a wife. 28 But if you marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned. Yet such will have trouble in this life, and I

am trying to spare you. ²⁹ But this I say, brethren, the time has been shortened, so that from now on those who have wives should be as though they had none; ³⁰ and those who weep, as though they did not weep; and those who rejoice, as though they did not rejoice; and those who buy, as though they did not possess; ³¹ and those who use the world, as though they did not make full use of it; for the form of this world is passing away. ³² But I want you to be free from concern. One who is unmarried is concerned about the things of the Lord, how he may please the Lord; ³³ but one who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how he may please his wife, ³⁴ and his interests are divided. The woman who is unmarried, and the virgin, is concerned about the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and spirit; but one who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how she may please her husband. ³⁵ 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.

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. 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. 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. ³⁹ 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. ⁴⁰ But in my opinion she is happier if she remains as she is; and I think that I also have the Spirit of God.

As we study (and as you can see if you have a handout), I'd like to divide this passage into three smaller chunks...

- I. ...starting with verses 17-24 and Paul's reminder that **WE ARE TO SERVE GOD RIGHT WHERE WE ARE**, and the reason is: **OUR IDENTITY IS NOT DETERMINED BY OUR MARITAL STATUS.** ****PPT****

To get the big picture here, let's notice something Paul repeats three times in this passage: In verse 17, ***"Only, as the Lord has assigned to each one, as God has called each, in this manner let him walk."*** In verse 20, ***"Each man must remain in that condition in which he was called."*** And in verse 24, ***"Brethren, each one is to remain with God in that condition in which he was called."*** In other words, we are to serve God in whatever condition or circumstances we are in right now! The larger context is marriage, but to help us understand the point he's making, the apostle Paul gives two examples.

The first is CIRCUMCISION. And what he basically says here is: Circumcision doesn't matter. If you're circumcised, serve the Lord! On the other hand, if you're not circumcised, serve the Lord! Don't waste your life wishing you were or wishing you weren't. Either way, if you are Jew or Gentile, serve the Lord. Your identity is not determined by your status in this area. You are a Christian! What matters is ***"keeping the Lord's commandments"*** (verse 19). Serve the Lord as you have been called.

The second example is SLAVERY. And as with circumcision, he basically says: Whether slave or free, serve the Lord. Don't let even your slavery hold you back in this area. Whether slave or free, serve the Lord right where you are. Your identity as a Christian is not determined by whether you are slave or free. If you can be free, great; do that. But either way, you are a slave primarily of Jesus Christ. Serve Him!

The circumstances might be different (circumcision and slavery are not exactly how we classify ourselves today), but the big idea is the same: Instead of letting our current circumstances hold us back, Paul is telling us to serve God right where we are. We are not to hold back in our service to God because of our present circumstances. And if this applies to circumcision and slavery, it also applies to marriage: If you're married, serve God! If you're single, serve God! A fulfilling life of Christian service does not depend on a change in circumstances. It's not wrong to try to change our circumstances, it's not wrong to want to get married, but Paul's reminder here is: Serve God right where you are. So, if you're married today: Serve God! And if you are not married today: Serve God! God has a way of using all of us, right where we are. And again, this isn't coming from your preacher who's been married almost 27 years; this is coming from Paul, who is not married himself.

II. **And this leads us into the next paragraph, as Paul describes SEVERAL BENEFITS OF LIVING THE SINGLE LIFE.**

As we come to verses 25-35, he describes at least three advantages:

A. **And the first comes in verses 25-28 as Paul makes the argument that being single is preferred, because THOSE WHO ARE UNMARRIED WILL HAVE LESS PRESSURE DURING A TIME OF INTENSE PERSECUTION.**

He makes it clear that this is his *"opinion."* It is an inspired opinion, but he gives the reason for it: If you are not married, it's pretty much *"good"* to stay that way *"in view of the present distress,"* he says. If you are married, don't get unmarried; that's not what we're talking about here; but if you're single, Paul is suggesting that you stay that way. It's not a sin to get married, but you'll have a bit more *"trouble,"* and he's trying to save these people from that. When he refers to the *"present distress,"* he's referring to the idea of getting "compressed" or "squeezed." And so, there was something happening in the world at that time that would make marriage especially difficult for a Christian. He doesn't really explain, but it seems that he's referring to persecution of some kind. We think of Paul himself. At one time, he did the persecuting, and now he is the one getting persecuted. And it seems to me as if Paul is saying being married would have a way of making it worse. We think of Paul getting beaten and left for dead, we think of Paul getting arrested and put in prison, we think of Paul being shipwrecked, we think of Paul facing execution. That's bad enough, but imagine having your wife along for all of that. Imagine having your kids along for all of that. His suggestion, then, because of the *"present distress,"* is that if you are currently single, it's probably best (in his opinion) to stay that way. Things are about to get really ugly, and having a family will make it worse. You might remember how God did not allow Jeremiah to get married for this exact reason (we see this in Jeremiah 16:2-4). Like Paul, Jeremiah was also preaching during a time of persecution, but in his case, God specifically forbid him from having a wife and children. So, this isn't something that applies to all people at all times, but in a time of intense persecution, it is sometimes better not to be married. Not that it is a sin to be married, but marriage complicates things. So, this is the first benefit to staying single: It saves us from trouble in a time of distress.

B. **The second benefit comes in verses 29-31, as Paul basically explains that LIFE IS SHORT.**

In verse 29, he says that *"the time has been shortened."* To be *"shortened"* is the idea of something being "drawn together" or "made smaller." Last week, I walked from our house down to Farm and Fleet in Verona. It was windy and raining, so I tightened the drawstrings on my hood. I drew it together. I made it smaller. And that's, in a sense, what Paul is referring to here. The time has been *"shortened"* or "drawn together." Then, in verse 31, he refers to the fact that *"the form of this world is passing away."* Or, as we might say today: Life is short! And in addition to marriage, he gives a few illustrations as he refers to weeping, and rejoicing, and buying,

and selling. And it seems that his point is: Because life is so short, don't get hung up on marriage, because just like everything else, either good or bad, marriage is also quite temporary. Yes, it is for a lifetime, but life itself is very brief. So, don't let what is temporary get in the way of what is truly eternal. Don't get distracted, even by marriage.

C. And this leads us to another benefit of being single as Paul explains (in verses 32-35) that remaining unmarried allows God's people to be "FREE FROM CONCERN" or "FREE FROM DISTRACTIONS." **PPT******

Not that the unmarried have no concerns, but with reference to the Lord, those who are married have interests that are divided. In marriage, we take a vow to be concerned about somebody. We take a vow to love, and to honor another human being. And by necessity, a good chunk of our time and our mental energy is diverted away from God and toward this person. And I know, by loving our spouse we are actually loving God, in a sense, but in a very real way, we are distracted. It's not necessarily bad, but it's the reality. Those of us who are married are distracted. Those aren't my words, those are Paul's words. And what he says comes in the form of this reminder that those who are unmarried are able to *"secure undistracted devotion to the Lord."* Now, Paul is not forcing this. This isn't a command. But this is Paul's suggestion. This is for the *"benefit"* of those who are not married, not as a command, but as a reminder: Marriage can be something of a distraction.

We think of Paul traveling from one end of the Mediterranean world to the other. There's something to be said for the fact that Paul never had to get permission from Mrs. Paul to do that. He wasn't leaving her behind with a house full of children; but instead, every bit of Paul's mind was absolutely and completely dedicated to pleasing the Lord, without distraction. I think about the summer I lived in Janesville, a year before we got married. They hadn't had a preacher for several years, and there was so much to do. I was new at this, so I remember keeping track of my hours, and most days were absolutely jam-packed full of church stuff – study, home visits, nursing homes, jails, phone calls, sermon prep, class prep, Bible studies, working around the building, and on and on. I had zero distractions. In terms of rest, all I needed was a place to crash for a few hours at night. I shared a room with a guy who worked from 6 p.m. to 6 a.m. at a factory making seats for the GM plant down there. I think I only saw him two times that entire summer. Of course, when I got married, I had to cut back on some of that. I could no longer work 100 hours every week. I was distracted, in a sense! Me getting married, was a huge blessing to the church, of course. But I think most of us understand what Paul is saying here: When we get married, we don't just add our spouse to all of our current responsibilities, but something has to go! Something has to give. And when children come along, all of this is even more true, isn't it? When my children get homework at school, I get homework! Because of my children, I've spent more time in doctors' offices and ER's and urgent cares than I ever imagined was even possible – not to mention karate, and ballet, and track meets, and computer hacking competitions. I have been to some ballet recitals where I have prayed for the Lord to return soon! And on and on. I wouldn't give it up for anything, but Paul acknowledges reality here: Marriage and family life can be something of a distraction, or at least it should be. If it isn't, we are doing it wrong! By the way, I think I've observed through the years that this is where some couples get in trouble – they get married, and one or both continue living as if they are still single. That doesn't reflect the reality of marriage. And that seems to be what Paul is saying here: By remaining unmarried, some will be able to maintain an undistracted devotion to the Lord.

And we've seen this here, in our own lives – the encouragement and undistracted spiritual devotion that singles can provide – from drive-by lasagnas, to taking on tough assignments, to coordinating entire programs, we know that what Paul says here is true. And so, there are some benefits to this unhindered devotion to God.

III. **As we come to the last paragraph, I would summarize what Paul says here in terms of a reminder, that IT IS NOT A SIN TO GET MARRIED, AS LONG AS WE MARRY WITHIN GOD'S LAW.**

And we have two categories down in this last paragraph. In verses 36-38, Paul first seems to address fathers who are wondering whether to let their daughters get married. You might notice that we have some translation issues here. It literally refers to a *“man”* and his *“virgin,”* which is a little bit weird! You'll notice that the NASB has interpreted this to refer to someone's *“virgin daughter,”* but *“daughter”* is in italics. It was added by the translators, to help it make sense. Other translations take this as a reference to an engaged couple wondering where to go on this. But either way, Paul's reminder is that it's not a sin to get married. In Paul's mind, it's better to hold off on marriage during this time of persecution, but if a dad not allowing his daughter to get married seems to be too overbearing or unfair, if it's putting her in a bad spot and putting her at risk of sin, then go ahead and let her get married. If she consents to staying single, though, that's even better, in Paul's opinion. The same basic principles would apply if this is actually about an engaged couple.

The last few verses are addressed to widows. Marriage is for life, but if the husband dies, the wife is free to get remarried, but only *“in the Lord.”* Some have suggested this means “according to God's Law” (which makes sense), but I have taken it to mean that she is to marry a Christian. If you'd like to know more about both sides of that, let me know. But the big idea here at the end, is that it is okay to get married. He's been giving his opinion that it's best to stay single throughout this chapter, so he closes with a reminder that if you really want to get married, go for it.

Conclusion:

What do we learn from all of this? What I've noticed in this passage is that all of us need to be serving God – right where we are. Those of us who are married are not to let being married get in the way, and those who are single are not to let being single get in the way. And to me, it seems rather straightforward. I've included two very good articles in the cubbyholes today, one of them written by a friend of mine who's a licensed therapist, and he has some very good and practical words. We could have addressed this issue topically today, but we didn't. Instead, this morning we have allowed the word of God to arrange and guide our thoughts, and there is a real value to that as well.

As we close, I just hope we remember that some of the greatest heroes of the Bible were not married – either throughout their lifetime or at the time they did whatever it was that made them spiritual heroes. We think of great men like Joseph, and Jeremiah, and Daniel, and Paul, and Jesus himself. We could even mention Anna, as we talked about her in our Wednesday class last week. These men and women actually did what Paul is talking about here. I hope this will be an encouragement to us.

If there is some way we can serve you, we hope you will get in touch. I realize today is somewhat unusual, so I've put our contact information on the wall up here. Hopefully this comes through on the livestream as well. If you have any questions about God's plan for our salvation, if there is something we need to be praying about, we hope you will let us know. Send an email. Either call or text the number up here. If we can help you with food or necessities this week, please get in touch.

God sent his Son as a sacrifice for our sins. In response, he demands that we publicly confess him as the Christ, the Son of God, he demands that we turn from sin, he demands that we be immersed in water for the forgiveness of sins. At this point we are born into God's family, and we have the privilege of living for him,

whether married or single. If we can help in some way, let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

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