

The Church of the Servant King

www.cotsk.org

Survey of the Bible Series – Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians

(SB_1Cor7A_Instructions Regarding Marriage)

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

The remainder of this first letter to the Corinthian believers is devoted to addressing questions that had been directed to Paul in a letter – a letter which we do not have. In chapter 7, Paul begins addressing those questions. It is interesting that the first of the questions Paul addresses pertains to the subject of marriage.

The historical and societal context – Similar to what will develop later in the 1st and 2nd Century as a more influential philosophy (i.e. Gnosticism that promoted a dualistic view of the material and the non-material), the Corinthian believers had manifested a dualistic view of the physical and the spiritual. As in later Gnosticism, there were two primary groups that emerged.

- *The licentious group* – As we observed in our study of chapter 6, one group was licentious and believed that since the physical body was to perish and since they were “spiritual” by virtue of having been saved and indwelt by the Holy Spirit (6:19), whatever they did in their physical bodies did not matter from a spiritual perspective. This group wanted to practice sex outside of marriage – perhaps with other believers, perhaps with unbelievers and perhaps even with the temple prostitutes since Paul specifically mentions prostitutes in his instruction (see 6:12-20).
- *The ascetic group* – Another group evidently believed that material or temporal things were bad and spiritual things were good; therefore, they thought that they should refrain acting upon their physical desires so that they might become more spiritual. They were promoting celibacy inside and outside of the marriage.

As one reads Paul’s letter to the Corinthians and as one gains more familiarity with the historical and cultural context in Corinth that existed in the A.D. 50’s when Paul ministered there, the picture that begins to emerge is one in which these new believers were desiring to live out of their old man and were attempting to find justification for doing so. The letter that Paul mentions in 7:1 to which he now responds was probably written by the Corinthians in response to an earlier letter by Paul that is mentioned in 1 Corinthians 5:9 – *“I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people.”*

Paul had spent about eighteen months teaching and ministering to these new believers – predominately Gentile. Evidently, many failed to grasp the depth and breadth of Paul’s instruction. They failed to get the big picture. They were too myopic and self-focused to grasp the greater panorama and its significance in regards to their daily life. Similar to a self-centered child or adolescent, the attitude that is reflected in Paul’s address to them seems to be one of “Why can’t we?” What a contrast to the humble soul who would ask a spiritual mentor – “How do I in this or that set of circumstances?”

Paul makes authoritative statements in this passage, but we also find less authoritative statements as well. In chapter 7 as well as in 11:2-6 (where Paul addresses the length of hair on a man and woman), we find phrases such as “I say this by way of concession, not of command” (v. 6), “it is good for them” (vv. 8, 26), and “I have no command, but I give my opinion” (v. 25 cf. 40). These are less authoritative phrases; however, they are based upon the wisdom of a spiritual man. Paul understood the necessity for freedom in matters not sinful or dishonoring to the Lord, yet he also possessed great wisdom – wisdom to which great heed should be given.

PRINCIPLES OF MARRIAGE

1 Now concerning the things about which you wrote, it is good for a man not to touch a woman. 2 But because of immoralities, each man is to have his own wife, and each woman is to have her own husband. 3 The husband must fulfill his duty to his wife, 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 also the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. 5 Stop depriving one another, except by agreement for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer, and come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. 6 But this I say by way of concession, not of command. 7 Yet I wish that all men were even as I myself am. However, each man has his own gift from God, one in this manner, and another in that. 8 But I say to the unmarried and to widows that it is good for them if they remain even as I. 9 But if they do not have self-control, let them marry; for it is better to marry than to burn with passion. 10 But to the married I give instructions, not I, but the Lord, that the wife should not leave her husband 11 (but if she does leave, she must remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband should not divorce his wife. 12 But to the rest I say, not the Lord, that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he must not divorce her. 13 And a woman who has an unbelieving husband, and he consents to live with her, she must not send her husband away. 14 For the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her believing husband; for otherwise your children are unclean, but now they are holy. 15 Yet if the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave; the brother or the 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? (1 Cor 7:1-16)

This is not a very difficult passage to understand even though it could easily be distorted. I will try to summarize the highlights of the passage since we are primarily interested in understanding Paul's primary message here. Also, I will try to reconcile Paul's teaching on the subject of marriage, divorce, remarriage and sex contained in this passage with other passages in which Paul addresses the same (or similar) topics.

Verse 1 – Opening Remarks.

"It is good for a man not to touch a woman." There are different views regarding the situation to which Paul was referring. Was Paul addressing married men? Was Paul addressing men who were single and had not yet married?

One thing is certain. All of Paul's instruction and guidance in this chapter should be understood in the context of Paul's statement in verse 26 that *"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."* We do not know what this *"present distress"* happened to be. Some have conjectured that Paul was anticipating the 2nd Advent to occur soon; therefore, Paul was anticipating the period of Tribulation that would precede Jesus' 2nd Advent. If that were the case, Paul would have argued against marriage in his other letters as well. So, this *"present distress"* seems to be something specific to Corinth. It may have been Paul's concern that these young and immature Corinthian believers were about to undergo persecution for their faith – similar to that which Paul had previously endured.

I believe that Paul is making a general statement here regarding sexual relations and celibacy. Paul was celibate and says in verse 7 that *"...I wish that all men were even as I myself am."* However, it is quite obvious from the remainder of the passage that Paul realized that to impose such a condition on others would be a recipe for disaster. (Witness the history of the

Roman Catholic Church and its imposition of this requirement upon its “priests”). This is why he is so careful in his choice of words throughout this section. After all, isn’t it obvious that these believers were having a difficult enough time grasping spiritual Truth – much less practicing celibacy in the interest of the advance of the gospel as in Paul’s case? Evidently, some thought that they should try to do so and thereby imitate Paul; however, Paul clearly shows greater wisdom.

Verses 2-7 – Sexual Obligations in Marriage.

But because of immoralities, each man is to have his own wife, and each woman is to have her own husband. 3 The husband must fulfill his duty to his wife, 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 also the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. 5 Stop depriving one another, except by agreement for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer, and come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. 6 But this I say by way of concession, not of command. 7 Yet I wish that all men were even as I myself am. However, each man has his own gift from God, one in this manner, and another in that.

Paul clearly argues against the extended practice of celibacy within marriage that some within the Corinthian church were suggesting as a path to greater spirituality. (I do not believe that Paul is indicating that marriage should be viewed as the solution to the propensity toward sexual immorality among singles – a view that interprets verse 1 to be the desired state of singles and verses 2ff to be the solution to the problems that result. Rather, the greater context is married believers in Corinth who think that reverting to celibacy is the path to greater spirituality).

A brief summary of points from this passage follows:

- Paul’s argument is built upon God’s perfect design for the man and woman prior to the Fall as recorded in Genesis 2:18-24.

18 Then the LORD God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him.” 19 Out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the sky, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called a living creature, that was its name. 20 The man gave names to all the cattle, and to the birds of the sky, and to every beast of the field, but for Adam there was not found a helper suitable for him. 21 So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then He took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh at that place. 22 The LORD God fashioned into a woman the rib which He had taken from the man, and brought her to the man.

23 The man said,
“This is now bone of my bones,
And flesh of my flesh;
She shall be called Woman,
Because she was taken out of Man.”

24 For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh. (Gen 2:18-24)

- In regards to sex, each spouse has mutual responsibility to the other as well as mutual rights to the other spouse’s body – this is mutual submission.
- However, in regards to the marital arrangement, Paul is very clear in other passages that the husband has the authority and the husband’s example is the self-sacrificial pattern of Jesus Christ – not to mention the necessity for the man to realize the woman to be God’s gift to him as is clear from Genesis 2:18-24.

8 For man does not originate from woman, but woman from man; 9 for indeed man was not created for the woman's sake, but woman for the man's sake. 10 Therefore the woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels. 11 However, in the Lord, neither is woman independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. 12 For as the woman originates from the man, so also the man has his birth through the woman; and all things originate from God. (1 Cor 11:8-9)

22 Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord. 23 For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body. 24 But as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives ought to be to their husbands in everything. 25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, 26 so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, 27 that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless. 28 So husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself; 29 for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also does the church, 30 because we are members of His body. 31 FOR THIS REASON A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS FATHER AND MOTHER AND SHALL BE JOINED TO HIS WIFE, AND THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH. 32 This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church. 33 Nevertheless, each individual among you also is to love his own wife even as himself, and the wife must see to it that she respects her husband. (Eph 5:22-33)

18 Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. 19 Husbands, love your wives and do not be embittered against them. (Col 3:18-19)

1 In the same way, you wives, be submissive to your own husbands so that even if any of them are disobedient to the word, they may be won without a word by the behavior of their wives, 2 as they observe your chaste and respectful behavior. 3 Your adornment must not be merely external--braiding the hair, and wearing gold jewelry, or putting on dresses; 4 but let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the imperishable quality of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is precious in the sight of God. 5 For in this way in former times the holy women also, who hoped in God, used to adorn themselves, being submissive to their own husbands; 6 just as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord, and you have become her children if you do what is right without being frightened by any fear. 7 You husbands in the same way, live with your wives in an understanding way, as with someone weaker, since she is a woman; and show her honor as a fellow heir of the grace of life, so that your prayers will not be hindered. (1 Pet 3:1-7)

- The verb translated "stop depriving" in verse 5 is the present, active, imperative of *apostereo* (Gr. ἀποστερέω). This highlights the fact that married believers in Corinth were attempting to revert to a celibate lifestyle within marriage.
- Paul indicates that should a couple chose to do this, then they should only do it with mutual consent for a brief period of time.
- Paul was very aware of the sexually charged nature of the cultural environment in which these believers lived and the temptations that type of environment would present to a man and woman.
- Paul's reference to Satan tempting such believers should best be understood to be a reference to the temptations that Satan's system would present to them – not a reference to Satan personally visiting a believer and tempting him or her as was the case with his temptation of Jesus in Matthew 4:1-11.

- Paul understands the physical and emotional changes that are wrought in the soul and bodies of a man and a woman once they have consummated a marriage when he mentions “self-control” in verse 5.
- In God’s design, when two virgins are married, the physical and emotional bond that is created in sex has a God-ordained purpose.
- If that bond is broken for whatever reason (extended practice of celibacy, refusal of one spouse to submit their body to the other spouse’s needs due to any number of reasons, divorce, etc.), the temptation to find a substitute or replacement for the loss is often overwhelming and all-consuming.
- Some view the inability of a person to abstain from sex to be indicative of a lack of self-control; however, Paul views extended abstinence from sex within marriage to be evidence of a lack of self-control, i.e. the self-control to be mutually submissive to each other.
- The “gift” to which Paul refers in verse 7 is not a spiritual gift; rather, it should be seen as a gracious temporal provision from God.

Verses 8-9 – The Option of Remaining Single and Unmarried

8 But I say to the unmarried and to widows that it is good for them if they remain even as I. 9 But if they do not have self-control, let them marry; for it is better to marry than to burn with passion.

Here, I believe that Paul is addressing single people who have never been married (“unmarried”) and those women who had been married, but whose spouse had died (“widows”). Again, Paul makes a general statement regarding his status as the ideal, then he tempers it with the wisdom that a knowledge of human nature as viewed through the lens of a spiritual man brings to the situation.

In another passage, Paul counsels the younger widows to marry. He even provides some very specific instruction regarding the circumstances under which the local church should contribute to the support of widows.

3 Honor widows who are widows indeed; 4 but if any widow has children or grandchildren, they must first learn to practice piety in regard to their own family and to make some return to their parents; for this is acceptable in the sight of God. 5 Now she who is a widow indeed and who has been left alone, has fixed her hope on God and continues in entreaties and prayers night and day. 6 But she who gives herself to wanton pleasure is dead even while she lives. 7 Prescribe these things as well, so that they may be above reproach. 8 But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever. 9 A widow is to be put on the list only if she is not less than sixty years old, having been the wife of one man, 10 having a reputation for good works; and if she has brought up children, if she has shown hospitality to strangers, if she has washed the saints' feet, if she has assisted those in distress, and if she has devoted herself to every good work. 11 But refuse to put younger widows on the list, for when they feel sensual desires in disregard of Christ, they want to get married, 12 thus incurring condemnation, because they have set aside their previous pledge. 13 At the same time they also learn to be idle, as they go around from house to house; and not merely idle, but also gossips and busybodies, talking about things not proper to mention. 14 Therefore, I want younger widows to get married, bear children, keep house, and give the enemy no occasion for reproach; 15 for some have already turned aside to follow Satan. 16 If any woman who is a believer has dependent widows, she must assist them and the church must not be burdened, so that it may assist those who are widows indeed. (1 Tim 5:3-16)

The bottom line – Paul realizes the all-consuming nature of sexual desire in the life of a believer who is either single or who has lost a spouse. Obviously, Paul’s instructions are most applicable the younger a person happens to be.

Verses 10-16 – Instructions Regarding Divorce and Remarriage

10 But to the married I give instructions, not I, but the Lord, that the wife should not leave her husband 11 (but if she does leave, she must remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband should not divorce his wife. 12 But to the rest I say, not the Lord, that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he must not divorce her. 13 And a woman who has an unbelieving husband, and he consents to live with her, she must not send her husband away. 14 For the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her believing husband; for otherwise your children are unclean, but now they are holy. 15 Yet if the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave; the brother or the 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?

During Paul’s stay in Corinth, unbelievers had become believers. In some cases, one spouse became a believer while the other remained an unbeliever. Initially and most likely, the unbelieving spouse probably tolerated the believing spouse’s new-found faith thinking it to be but a passing fad. However, as time passed and as the believing spouse who desired to grow in their spiritual walk, the situation changed.

In verses 10-11, Paul focus is upon the married man and woman who “leaves” their spouse – possibly even for ascetic reasons as well as any other reason. If the wife leaves the husband, then she is to remain unmarried. Clearly, Paul allows for divorce; however, remarriage (or re-uniting) is only allowed with the former spouse who was left.

In verses 12-13, Paul states that it is the Lord’s command (not his own) that the spouse who had become a believer should remain married to the unbelieving spouse as long as the unbelieving spouse tolerated the believer and agreed to remain in the marriage.

In verse 14, Paul does not mean that the unbelieving spouse has eternal life or is somehow miraculously made a believer by virtue of the believing spouse’s faith. Paul means that the unbelieving spouse can be blessed by the believing spouse and eventually led to accept the saving gospel through the believing spouse’s testimony of word and life. The same principle applies to the children.

In verses 15-16, freedom is allowed. The unbeliever is to be given their freedom. Paul does not specifically indicate whether the believer would be free to remarry in this circumstance; however, based upon his instructions in verse 10-11, it would be wise for the believing spouse to remain unmarried until the unbeliever remarried or re-united. The overriding principle is “peace” in the home. More than anything, God desires “peace” in the home (v. 15). The lack of peace in the home is extremely disruptive to the spiritual life and walk of the believer and to any attempt to witness to the unbeliever.