

THROUGH THE BIBLE STUDY

1 CORINTHIANS 7:1-40

Did you hear about the woman who'd been married to four men. Her first husband was a [millionaire](#). Her second was a [film producer](#). Her third was a [butler](#). And her fourth husband was a [funeral director](#).

A millionaire, film maker, butler, and mortician.

Of course, the woman explained her choice in men as follows... "It was one for the [money](#), two for the [show](#), three to get ready, and four to go."

And that's a good lead-in to today's Bible study. In 1 Corinthians 7 Paul deals with the subjects of marriage, divorce, and singleness. He addresses [marriage in verses 1-9](#) - [divorce in verses 10-24](#) - [singleness in verses 25-40](#). Today's text has something for us all.

Up to this point in Paul's letter he's dealt with problems that existed in the Corinthian church. Their divisiveness, their tolerance of blatant sin, their use of the secular courts to settle their disputes, and their lax views on sex... Paul had corrected the Corinthians!

But in Chapter 7 he begins to answer questions posed to him by the church. Apparently, the last ten chapters of his letter make up Paul's response to a previous correspondence. He begins with marriage...

Verse 1, "[Now concerning the things of which you wrote to me: It is good for a man not to touch a woman.](#)" Here, the Greek word translated "touch" refers to "[an act of intimacy, to touch in a sexual way.](#)" And this is the Apostle Paul's first point about the institution of marriage... [It's a good thing to avoid!](#)

In Genesis 2:18, God said, "[It is not good that man should be alone.](#)" And His answer for our loneliness was marriage. Yet here the Holy Spirit says through Paul, "[It is good for a man not to touch a woman.](#)" So which is it? How should we feel about marriage?

It reminds me of an old saying, "[Marriage means showers for the bride, and curtains for the groom.](#)"

People have read Chapter 7 and accused Paul of having a negative attitude toward marriage. That's an unfair conclusion. Paul's comments here are not intended to be a comprehensive examination of marriage. This is a reply to questions he'd been asked.

If you want the unabridged version of "[Paul on Marriage](#)" read [Ephesians 5:22-33](#) where he exalts marriage by proclaiming it to be a picture of Christ's relationship with His Church... Read too, [Hebrews 13:4](#) where Paul assures us that sex in marriage is pure and holy... Also read [1 Timothy 4:3](#) where he lists "[forbidding to marry](#)" as a mark of apostasy...

When you consider the totality of Paul's teaching there is no contradiction. Generally speaking, Genesis 2 is right... "It is not good that man should be alone."

Yet there are unique circumstances, and distressing situations where 1 Corinthians 7 is also correct about marriage. "It is good for a man not to touch a woman."

Paul goes on in verse 2, "Nevertheless, because of sexual immorality, let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband."

In Matthew 19:12 Jesus speaks of people with the gift of celibacy. He refers to them as "Eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake." I believe there is a gift of singleness.

For some people sexual appetite isn't a problem. They have no burning desire or need to get marry. They can take it or leave it. To them life seems just as appealing flying solo, as it does getting married.

Later in Chapter 7, Paul will emphasize that for a Christian, singleness can actually be an advantage. Singles aren't distracted by many of the concerns that preoccupy married people. In essence, a single-Christian can be more single-ly devoted to the Lord.

But, either you've got this gift or you don't! This is where we shouldn't over-spiritualize... If you're a man and the sight of a pretty girl races your pulse and heats up the hormones; then God hasn't blessed you with the gift of singleness. You need a wife... And if you're a woman who dreams of being swept off her feet by a Prince Charming; it's very likely this gift is not for you.

If you desire sexual intimacy with the opposite sex; yet try to live a single life it'll likely lead you into sin... If you're "the marrying type" - its best you get married.

Verse 3 tells us, "Let the husband render to his wife the affection due her, and likewise also the wife to her husband. 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." When Kathy and I married we made a swap. Her soft, curvaceous, beautiful body became mine. And my hairy, ugly, lumpy body became hers. What a deal for me! Not so much for her...

But a big part of our marital responsibility is to meet each other's sexual needs. Paul says we are to "render the affection due." The Greek word "due" means "owed." A married person owes it to their spouse to engage in sex lovingly, passionately, and frequently.

Now I'm sure there's some selfish, sex-crazed husband somewhere who has misused this verse to endorse a perverted or unrealistic demand. No one has the right to use another person for their own selfish gratification. A wife is not her husband's sex toy.

Ephesians 5:25 explains a married man's motivation, "Husbands, love your wives even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it, that he might sanctify

and cleanse it." God calls a husband to love his wife in a way that cleanses and purifies, not harms.

But marital love does carry with it a sexual expectation. As long as both partners are physically fit, it's not unreasonable to expect sexual interest and expression from your spouse. **It's a Christian's duty!**

For Paul says to married couples in verse 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."** The one legitimate excuse to forego sex is fasting and prayer, not **"I'm too busy,"** or **"I'm too tired,"** or heaven forbid, **"It's not your birthday."** Marital sex should be frequent. God says so. Always remember the devil's strategy, **"He does all he can to encourage you to have sex before you get married. Then he does all he can to discourage you from having sex after you get married."**

Married couples should realize that the sex act is a tool to **build with** - not a weapon to **fight with**. If you withhold sex as a means of punishing or manipulating your spouse you are disobeying God. Marital sex should always be an expression of committed love.

Pastor Charlie Shedd wrote a series of letters to his daughter before she married. In one of them he advises her: **"Dear Karen, smart girls don't ration their men. Your husband needs sex even when it may be the farthest thing from your mind. Convince him that you love him so much you enjoy sharing your charms with him simply because he's in the mood for more."**

Wives, here's a reminder... every day your husband goes out into a sex-obsessed world, and he's not been blessed with the gift of celibacy! If he had been, he would not have married you. I'm sure sex wasn't the only reason he married you, but it was a big reason!

Your husband married you because he wanted a holy, healthy sexual outlet - and he was willing to forego all other women to cultivate that with you.

A wise wife doesn't ignore the obvious... Trust me, loving, and passionate, and frequent sex with his wife is what takes the sexual pressure off a husband. **The temptations aren't as strong if a husband knows he has all the feminine affection he can handle at home.**

Verse 6, **"But I say this as a concession, not as a commandment."** Marriage is not a **"commandment,"** it's a **"concession"** to healthy human sexual desires. Paul is clear not everyone has to get married. But for those who do, the vow should come with a definite vow.

Verse 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. But I say to the unmarried and to the widows: It is good for them if they remain even as I am..."** Both singleness and

marriage are gifts from God, and Paul enjoyed being single. At the time of this writing he saw it as his preferred status.

Of course, the question arises how did Paul become single? Acts 7 implies Paul was once a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin, which required a man to be married and to have kids. Apparently, Paul once had a family.

It's conjecture, but Paul's wife may've left him when he began to follow Jesus. Today in some Orthodox Jewish homes, when a person converts to Christianity they hold a religious funeral and actually consider that person dead. This may've been Paul's experience.

However he got there, at the time he had embraced being single - and yet again, he knows singleness isn't for everyone. Once more, he emphasizes this, verse 9, **"But if they cannot exercise self-control, let them marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion."**

Once a pastor preached the sermon, **"Great Sex For Christians."** He began, **"Brothers and sisters, sex is great on days that start with the letter "T" - Tuesday, Thursday, Thatursday, Thunday, Today, and Tomorrow."**

Yes, sex is a beautiful, God-ordained gift reserved for marriage. Don't ever think that celibacy is more spiritual than marital sexuality. That's simply not true.

So if God has given you a normal sex drive; then your goal should be to position yourself for marriage. Here's how: Graduate, get a job, move out from mom and dad. This can take a little time, so while you're single learn to resist temptation, and gain self-control, and pray for the right kind of person. Then when you find him or her, have some faith and take the plunge. Marriage is God's means to relieve sexual pressure. As Paul puts it, **"It is better to marry than to burn."**

Remember, Paul is answering questions that have been posed to him by the Corinthians. So having dealt with marriage, in verse 10 he tackles the subject of divorce. **"Now to the married I command, yet not I but the Lord: A wife is not to depart from her husband."**

Malachi 2:16 is the Bible's definitive word on divorce, **"The Lord God of Israel says that he hates divorce."** And Paul will echo that sentiment in 1 Corinthians 7.

He continues, **"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 Matthew 19:8 our Lord Jesus acknowledged the reality of divorce. He credited it to the hardness of the human heart.

Moses established in the OT Law rules governing divorce that made it more difficult. God's Law discouraged divorce, minimizing the damage it would cause - but divorce was never, and is never God's ideal. **No marital problem is unsolvable with God.**

This is why according to verse 11 if a spouse departs the marriage, he or she has two options: **remain unmarried** or **be reconciled to their estranged spouse.**

If you divorce your spouse without a biblical justification it's a sin. Sometimes a cooling off period, or a temporary separation can be beneficial - but it needs to be followed by a sincere effort at restoration.

Verse 12 tells us, **“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. And a woman who has a husband who does not believe, if he is willing to live with her, let her not divorce him.”**

Just a side note, don't trip up over the phraseology. Paul says, **“I, not the Lord...”** several times in Chapter 7 as if he's downgrading his counsel from **divine inspiration** to **mere opinion**. But that's not what he means. If what he wrote wasn't inspired by God's Spirit it wouldn't have ended up in the pages of Scripture.

Generally, Paul's writings run parallel to the teachings of Jesus. But there were certain subjects Paul addressed that Jesus didn't deal with directly. And here's an example... For most of Jesus' ministry there were no believers. His own disciples didn't truly believe until after His resurrection. Thus, Jesus had little opportunity to address the subject of a believer married to an unbeliever. That meant on this issue Paul couldn't write, **“The Lord said...”** or **“Jesus told us...”**

Yet the Corinthians were facing this challenge and desperately needed wisdom. Thus, through the process of biblical inspiration the Holy Spirit provided them the counsel they needed through the pen of Paul.

And here are his instructions... If you're a believer who is married to an unbeliever, and your spouse rejects the Lord - **that doesn't give you the right to reject your spouse**. If the unbeliever desires to stay married; then the believer should stay married to them.

This addressed a common problem in the first century. The Bible teaches that a believer should never marry an unbeliever. 2 Corinthians 6 tells us that this is like hitching together two species of animal in the same harness. It makes for **an unequal yoke**. A Christian and non-Christian have two different natures. Harness them together and there's bound to be tension.

And while we're on the subject, guess how you avoid marrying an unbeliever? How about not dating one! The sign at the start of the Alaskan Highway reads, **“Choose your rut carefully, you'll be in it for the next 200 miles.”** When you marry someone you're choosing your rut. Wisdom thinks about where it'll lead. Christian marriage is until death do you part, happy or not.

But here's what often occurred in the first century. Many of the first Christians were married before they heard the Gospel. Thus, the Gospel became a wedge issue. Some spouses converted. Others didn't. And Paul tells the Corinthians, if their unconverted spouse wants to remain married; then good. And here's why?

“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." Understand, what Paul is not saying... He's not teaching that the unbelieving spouse, or kids, will get into heaven on the coattails of the believing spouse. **Salvation is not by proxy.**

The words "**sanctified**" and "**holy**" are the same Greek word "**hagios**" or "**to set apart.**" The word speaks of position and opportunity. Paul is saying when a believer remains married to an unbeliever the light of God continues to shine into the dark life of the unbeliever, and into the lives of their children. Christian witness and wisdom remains a constant influence.

Thus, the believer's involvement ensures a degree of spiritual safety for the family, and enhances the likelihood of the spouse and kids' ultimate salvation.

I realize, if you're a believer married to an unbeliever life gets tough. Imagine, a 3-legged race. Adult dads tied to short, chubby nine year-olds. It's amusing to watch the mismatched pairs awkwardly stumble along.

But this is what everyday looks like for a believer married to an unbeliever. Permanently attached to a person of uneven stature, and unequal stamina - often the believer carries an inordinate share of the load.

Such a life isn't easy, but if it means the eternal salvation of your family; then it's worth it! If this is your life, God loves you and He'll surely give you strength!

Verse 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.**" So if the unbeliever "**departs**" or abandons their commitment to the marriage, the believing spouse is free to move on.

But don't conclude this hastily, "**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?**" The grace you demonstrate, and long-suffering you show can be what saves your family.

Thus, there are two biblical scenarios where God permits divorce and remarriage... The first, Matthew 19:8, "**Whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery...**" Note the exception, "**pornea**" or "**sexual immorality.**"

And the word is a broad one. It includes all illicit sexual activity - homosexuality, adultery, pornography. If a person falls into a form of **persistent sexual misconduct** their spouse is free to divorce and remarry.

Of course divorce is not commanded. The offended spouse can choose to forgive and be reconciled, but God makes divorce available to the wounded spouse.

In the OT an adulterer was stoned to death, making the victim a widow, and free to remarry. In the NT God has mercy on the adulterer, but still affords a betrayed victim the same freedom to move on and start over.

And the second biblical justification for divorce and remarriage is what we've just read - **desertion**. Paul says, **"If the unbeliever departs, let him depart; a brother or sister is not under bondage in such cases"**

If you've been deserted by a spouse because of your faith in Jesus, and righteous conduct; then you have the prerogative to move on with your life and remarry in the will of God. The Greek word translated **"depart"** means **"to put room between."** It's an actual departure.

Be careful how you apply this verse. A husband who ignores his wife and watches too much football is guilty of insensitivity, not desertion. A wife who spends too much money at the mall is irresponsible - but hasn't deserted the marriage. Don't force an application.

Yet are there more grievous betrayals that do count as desertion? I believe "Yes!" A man who physically abuses his wife and kids... A wife strung out on drugs, and refuses to get help... People might sleep under the same roof, but does that mean they haven't left the marriage? After 42 years as a pastor I've concluded there are a lot of ways to depart a marriage without vacating the premises or filing divorce papers.

Certainly these kind of issues are problematic, and I'd never want to give a person in a difficult marriage a loophole to disobey God and opt for the easy way out.

If the unbeliever wants to remain married; then the believer should remain! Hear me say it... **You cannot divorce your spouse just because he or she is a jerk.**

But is desertion limited to the unbeliever packing his or her bags, and actually seeking a change of address?... I don't think so. Here's where we need to be led by God's Spirit, and be convinced in our heart.

Remember, the one certainty we started with, **"God hates divorce."** Marriage needs to be taken seriously.

Verse 17 tells us, **"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."** Paul has been addressing marriage, if Unbelieving Sam wants to stay married, Believing Betty needs to hang in there.

But now Paul takes this principle of staying where you're called and he applies it in broader ways...

He writes, **"Was anyone called while circumcised?"** Circumcision was and is the mark of being Jewish. Paul is saying if you're born a Jew, **"let him not become uncircumcised."** In other words, don't think following Christ will get easier by adopting Gentile customs.

"Was anyone called while uncircumcised?" In short, did you get saved as a Gentile? If so, **"Let him not be circumcised."** Don't think it'll be easier living as a Jew.

Paul concludes, **"Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing, but keeping the commandments of God is what matters."** Neither Gentile Christians or Jewish Christians have an advantage over the other. Both have their challenges.

Paul is saying, if you're a Jew, be a believing Jew. If you're a Gentile, be a believing Gentile. Changing your circumstances won't make a life of faith any easier. **Start living for Jesus wherever you've been called!**

Here's a huge key to living the Christian life: **bloom where you're planted.** I hear folks say, "When I find a wife; I'll settle down and live for Jesus." Or "When I get a new job I'll start being honest and ethical." Or "We're living together now, but when we get marry we'll start doing things God's way." No, no, a thousand times No! If you're serious about following Jesus **start doing things God's way right now - right where you're at.**

If it takes moving out and in with a friend - or informing your boss there's stuff you're no longer going to do - then so be it! Notice, verse 20 **"Let each one remain in the same calling in which he was called."**

Once we had a guy come to Christ who was a distribution manager for Budweiser. He drove a company van to our Men's Prayer Meeting, and he'd park way down the street. We didn't care, but he was embarrassed to park a beer truck in front of the church.

One day he confessed to me his occupation... He was afraid we'd no longer accept him as a brother. I told him, **"Scott, God says start where you've been called, so we're going to help you be the best beer distributor you can possibly be for Jesus' sake."**

I knew that might eventually cause a few problems for him. It did. Several months later, he resigned and got another job, but he started where he was called. And this is what all Christians are expected to do.

Verse 21, **Were you called while a slave? Do not be concerned about it; but if you can be made free, rather use it."** Slavery was common in Roman times. Many early Christians were slaves. Yet seldom did Paul and the early Church attack this evil head on. **Christianity ended up changing institutions by changing individuals.**

Here, Paul doesn't discourage a slave from using his newfound faith to gain his freedom. If he can, he should. Perhaps a master has an affinity for Christians!

But Paul tells the believing slave, even if his freedom from sin doesn't translate into freedom from slavery - don't let it stop him or her from living the Christian life.

Again, here's his point, begin your walk with the Lord wherever you're called... True happiness has nothing to do with our circumstances. Paul had met happy slaves and he'd met sad owners. Paul knows that happiness is the byproduct of a right relationship with God, not comfortable and cozy circumstances.

Verse 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. You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men."** How liberating!

It's not your physical circumstances that dictate your status. It's your spiritual relationship with Jesus! A slave who is a Christian is the freest of free men. And a free man who's a Christian is a slave to God's mercies.

He sums up the principle: “Brethren, let each one remain with God in that state in which he was called.”

As Christians the road isn't always easy. We can find ourselves in a prickly place. Paul says stay put. There are lessons to learn by staying where God has you.

Verse 25, “Now concerning virgins...” or “singles...” Since Christianity reserves sexual intimacy for marriage, single people were assumed to be “virgins.”

And to the single Christians he writes, “I have no commandment from the Lord; yet I give judgment as one whom the Lord in His mercy has made trustworthy.” Again Paul's language here doesn't dilute the authority of inspiration. It's just his way of saying he's tackling a subject, Jesus didn't directly address.

Verse 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: Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be loosed. Are you loosed from a wife? Do not seek a wife.” For the rest of Chapter 7 Paul extols the virtues of singleness. If you're single these verses will help. If you're married don't panic. You haven't made a mistake. We've discussed the advantages of marriage, but based on “the present distress” as Paul calls it, marriage may have a few drawbacks.

This is where he goes in verse 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.” Several factors complicated life for the very first Christians.

For one, they endured vicious persecution. This was an awful burden for a marriage to bear. Imagine, your spouse subject to floggings, prison time, shipwrecks. If Paul had a wife, I can hear her now, “Honey, can't you stop trapping blood in on the carpet...” or “Pauly, honey, please talk to your angel about breaking you out of jail so you can get home by dinnertime...”

Voice of the Martyrs founder, Richard Wurmbbrand, once told of a fellow pastor who had been persecuted by the communists. They tortured him trying to get him to deny Christ. He stood firm in his faith, until they brought in his 14 year-old son, and began to beat the boy unmercifully. It was all the poor pastor could handle. He broke, and verbally renounced his faith.

It's been said, “A man who is a hero himself is a coward when he thinks of his wife and children.”

A married man is vulnerable to hardships in a way he wouldn't be if he were single. Paul's advice to married folk is to live with the liability. But if you're single, getting married can set you up for greater risk.

Verse 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, 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, and those who use this world as not misusing it. For the form of this world is passing away.” Paul says, “time is short.” The early church lived as if Jesus were coming at any moment. Paul had streamlined his life so that his only care was Christ. And he encourages married people to do the same.

Certainly, Paul isn't suggesting we abandon our responsibilities. But neither should we make our family an idol. Some families I know are so busy catering to each other's schedules they have no time left for God. God made families to worship and serve Him together.

Verse 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. But he who is married cares about the things of the world - how he may please his wife.” When you get married suddenly you have two sets of worries, expenses, demands, and interests to focus on... If I weren't married I wouldn't have to maintain two cars - or purchase lipstick - or call home when I'm running late. I could spend all day serving God witnessing to lost folks on the golf course!

But I'm married, and God has commanded me to go home and minister to my wife. One husband writes, “I didn't know what happiness was until I got married, but then it was too late...” Hey, I'm thankful for my wife and kids. They're both incredible blessings and obligations..

But if you're single, why take on the obligation? Paul is saying that in “the present distress” a wife and family could just be a distraction you don't really need.

Verse 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.” Notice, a wife's big concern is pleasing her husband. That's not always how it works, but that's the ideal. Whereas, a single person can care about the things of the Lord. She's free to go out of her way for God and for others.

“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.” In Ephesians 5 Paul depicts marriage as a beautiful love story. But here he's not as romantic. He calls marriage “a leash.” Marriage is a dog collar that curtails our freedom.

That sounds rather harsh, but marriage does impose limits. I don't get to live a life of my own discretion, I have another earthly consideration, and that's my wife.

And in the next few verses Paul speaks to either fathers of daughters, or men who were pledged to a bride. It could be either. The point though is he's speaking to a culture where the men dictated the future of their female relatives, or as Paul puts it, “his virgin.”

He writes, “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.” If she’s getting older, and wants to marry; then let her. Marriage is not a sin.

“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. So then he who gives her in marriage does well, but he who does not give her in marriage does better.” Again, Paul’s point is clear - if you have the self-control to live a single life, and serve the Lord without distraction; then good - it has its advantages.

Paul concludes, “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.” A widow is free to remarry, but all Christians should marry “in the Lord,” or “to another Christian.”

“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, God calls some to be single. He calls others to marry... But He calls us all to bloom where we’ve been planted. Whatever your status is at the moment, do all that you do to the glory of God!