

Married and Single  
(1 Corinthians 7)

Turn in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 7.

I think there is no place in the Bible where we find such a concern to make things exactly equal between women and men. In these questions of marriage and singleness, what applies to the men applies to the women, and what applies to the women also to the men.

And the apostle Paul spells it out, time after time, and we'll read through these in a minute. There was a 1st century feminism of sorts, a women's liberation movement.

It was different than the modern one, those women wanted different things. But that did happen in 1st century Roman society. For example, there were religions just for women.

And it seems that the women in the church at Corinth saw the gospel as giving them a foundation to not be so male dominated.

The main example is in 1 Cor 11, where married women were doing something with their heads or their hair, when they went to church, to make it look like they were single not married. We don't understand much that was going on behind 1 Cor 11, but that much seems clear: the wives thought that in church they should look and act single.

In 1 Cor 11 the apostle Paul wrote that this was not the way to worship God. There he corrected the women. But there is no doubt that in some important ways Paul agreed with those women, that the gospel of Jesus leveled things out between men and women.

Some of you are getting real nervous, and others are getting real happy. Either way, we'll read the ways the Scripture carefully says the same to men and women, and you'll see.

Next week I plan to speak about marriage one last time, from Ephesians and 1 Peter. I'll take the Scriptures about the husband being the head of the wife just the way it is described, which is not the way it is often preached. Next week.

But here, in 1 Cor 7, the gospel levels things between men and women, and I'm going to read the parts of this chapter that make this clear. Notice just one thing as I read: how careful Paul is to have exactly the same standard for women as for men. Ten examples:

1. (7:2) <sup>2</sup> *But since sexual immorality is occurring, each man should have sexual relations with his own wife, and each woman with her own husband.*
2. (7:3) <sup>3</sup> *The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband.*

3. (7:4) <sup>4</sup> *The wife does not have authority over her own body but yields it to her husband. In the same way, the husband does not have authority over his own body but yields it to his wife.*

4.? (7:8) <sup>8</sup> *Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I do. <sup>9</sup> But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion.*

There is some debate about that one, whether or not "unmarried" refers to men and women, or just men. It's hard to be sure. Greek had a word for "widowers" but it was quite rare, so I think "unmarried" in this line probably refers to men whose wives died.

5. (7:10-11) <sup>10</sup> *To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. <sup>11</sup> But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife.*

6. (7:12-13) <sup>12</sup> *To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord): If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. <sup>13</sup> And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him.*

7. (7:14) <sup>14</sup> *For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband.*

8. (7:15) <sup>15</sup> *But if the unbeliever leaves, let it be so. The brother or sister is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace.*

9. (7:16) <sup>16</sup> *How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?*

10. (7:27-28) <sup>27</sup> *Are you pledged to a woman [referring to a man]? Do not seek to be released. Are you free from such a commitment? Do not look for a wife. <sup>28</sup> But if you do marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned.*

There are two more in the last nine verses of 1 Cor 7, but they are longer and I won't read them. These ten are enough to make the point that the gospel of Jesus changes how men and women treat each other. In all these things, women are equal to men.

All the way through 1 Corinthians 7, Paul teaches things about marriage and singleness and about sexual intimacy that were not the views of either Jewish society or Roman society. Things work differently in the kingdom; let's pay attention.

This also means that we need to be reluctant in other places to say that the NT writers are only going along with the society of the day so that Christians will look like honourable people. Scripture writers never go against the gospel just to keep pagan society happy.

Now, let's look more closely what God actually says to wives and husbands. This chapter is too long to go through the whole chapter. We'll do two things for the rest of this teaching. First, we'll look at verses 1-16, and then we'll look at living single.

<sup>1</sup> *Now for the matters you wrote about: "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman."*

Almost all the commentators now agree that this line, *it is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman*, is not what Paul was teaching, but what the Corinthian believers said to Paul in a letter. He does not agree with that line.

Some of the Corinthian married believers had decided that sexual intimacy was not spiritual, that if they were really devoted to God they would not need sexual intimacy, would not want it, would not do it.

And husbands were deciding this but not their wives, or wives were deciding this but not their husbands. Paul does not like this, and goes after it. For married people, to be spiritual, to be devoted to God, does *not* mean leaving sexual intimacy behind.

It means almost the opposite: it means husband and wife both are available to their spouses.

7:2 <sup>2</sup> *But since sexual immorality is occurring, each man should have sexual relations with his own wife, and each woman with her own husband.*

The teaching here is not that sexual relations are the only way not to live promiscuously, but rather that there is immorality around, including inside the Corinthian church (5:1-5; 6:12-20), so there is all the more reason to be sexually active in marriage.

7:3 <sup>3</sup> *The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband.*

In the church we have come to assume this, but in the Roman world this was not the normal opinion, at all. Marriage is the proper place for erotic desire. There is nothing here about having children. This is about ongoing desire for physical intimacy.

7:4 <sup>4</sup> *The wife does not have authority over her own body but yields it to her husband. In the same way, the husband does not have authority over his own body but yields it to his wife.*

Husbands or wives can be demanding and unreasonable about this. There needs to be some mutual consideration and submission. Husbands and wives often have different appetites for sexual intimacy, and that can be a problem. But the basic principle is mutual availability - of that there is no doubt.

*7:5-6 <sup>5</sup> Do not deprive each other except perhaps by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. <sup>6</sup> I say this as a concession, not as a command.*

Paul's concession is that the couple would stay apart for a short time for prayer, when both wife and husband agree to it. He does not think this is necessary at all, or better, but if the couple wants to do then he'll allow it, if it is brief, and if both agree.

*7:7 <sup>7</sup> I wish that all of you were as I am. But each of you has your own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that.*

Here we get the beginning of Paul's teaching on living single. Paul wishes everyone could live without sexual intimacy. That was God's gift to Paul. But he understood that this was not God's gift to everyone.

There is always a temptation to say that what works well for me is best for everyone, but Paul doesn't do that.

*7:8-9 <sup>8</sup> Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I do. <sup>9</sup> But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion.*

Here Paul speaks to the unmarried. To the married, choosing to avoid sexual intimacy is simply wrong. Once a person is married, they've made a decision for sexual intimacy.

But living single is good. It is not better, but it is good. Married is good, and single is good. Protestants did not like the Catholic view that people completely devoted to God should stay single, so Protestants reacted by downplaying singleness. That's not good.

There are two good options: one good option is being married, and the other good option is living single. And 1 Cor 7 works hard to call believers to take singleness as a serious option. It is good. It is not inferior, or unnatural. It is good.

V9 says "if they cannot control themselves." That is a bit misleading. The Scripture is not assuming that if some people are not married, then they will automatically live sinfully, promiscuously. That is not what this Scripture assumes.

The self control needed here is the ability not to be distracted and preoccupied by their desires and longings. The people Paul has in mind here to not have the ability to get on with the important things in life because they are distracted and preoccupied.

They cannot put aside what they are missing and just carry on. They don't have that ability. That is the self control they do not have. Then, they should marry.

There is another factor here that affects life in our day that this Scripture does not talk about. There are more believing young women in our churches generally than believing young men. That's just the way it is.

The same number of boys as girls are born into families that follow the Lord, but more young men drop out of faith in God than young women. I am not pleased to be a part of that gender, but it is still true. Boys and young men, be warned.

So some believing women who want to marry and are entirely marriageable will either live single, or end up marrying an unbeliever. A decent number end up single, not by choice, or because they believe it to be their gift, but because there's no believing man.

Some men stay single by default too, because marriage never quite works out. But God is not caught by surprise in any of this.

Circumstances are one common way in which God calls his people, and if God's calls by circumstances, he will also give daily help. The God who calls us is faithful.

*7:10-11* <sup>10</sup> *To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. <sup>11</sup> But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife.*

"Not I, but the Lord:" Paul is quoting from Jesus' words that we have in the Gospels. Later Paul will say, "I, not the Lord," by which he means that Paul is no longer quoting from teaching Jesus gave when he taught people during his life on earth.

This divorce teaching was radical teaching in the Roman world and also in the Jewish world. Even the disciples, when they heard Jesus say this, found his teaching on divorce almost impossible to accept at face value. Mt 19:10 - *If this is the situation between a husband and a wife, it is better not to marry*, is their answer to Jesus.

It is also possible here that this has to do with 7:1; that is, that married couples were separating to be more spiritual. Paul says this is not a ticket eventually to a new spouse.

*7:12-13* <sup>12</sup> *To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord): If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. <sup>13</sup> And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him.*

That's clear enough. Now, let's look just at the places in the rest of this chapter that concern living singly rather than married.

*7:28* <sup>28</sup> *But if you do marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned. But those who marry will face many troubles in this life, and I want to spare you this.*

7:32-35 <sup>32</sup> *I would like you to be free from concern. An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord's affairs—how he can please the Lord. <sup>33</sup> But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world—how he can please his wife—<sup>34</sup> and his interests are divided. An unmarried woman or virgin is concerned about the Lord's affairs: Her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit. But a married woman is concerned about the affairs of this world—how she can please her husband. <sup>35</sup> I am saying this for your own good, not to restrict you, but that you may live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord.*

7:37-40 <sup>37</sup> *But the man who has settled the matter in his own mind, who is under no compulsion but has control over his own will, and who has made up his mind not to marry the virgin—this man also does the right thing. <sup>38</sup> So then, he who marries the virgin does right, but he who does not marry her does better.*

If a man is not under compulsion, but has control over his own will, which means that he is not so distracted by being single that he can't get on with life: if such a man marries he is doing the right thing, and if he does not he does better.

Paul does not mean here that single is better. Paul has said too often in the chapter, as all of Scripture says, that both married and single are right before God.

On the other hand, there is no doubt that in 1 Cor 7 Paul is tilting the scale toward living as a single, not because it is more pleasing to God, but because it is not being taken as a serious option, either in Corinth or now.

<sup>39</sup> *A woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, but he must belong to the Lord. <sup>40</sup> In my judgment, she is happier if she stays as she is—and I think that I too have the Spirit of God.*

I want you all to notice how practical this whole discussion is. The advantage of being married is that sexual intimacy is regularly available. Just for the record, it is not that simple. I spoke with a medical doctor once who knew of many happy marriages where due to some medical condition, sexual intimacy was rare or impossible. *Many* such.

But in this Scripture, the advantage of being married is that sexual intimacy is usually available. The advantage of being single is that a single person is much freer from all kinds of daily concerns.

The disadvantage of being married is that there are many daily concerns and distractions that a person would otherwise not have. The disadvantage of being single is that lack of physical intimacy can be a big distraction.

They are both good, both right. God is good with both. But Paul thinks that believers are not taking living single as a serious option, so he pushes in that direction.

Singles in church life. Churches must organize their lives together so that singles are not odd, not left out. Because we have not taken this teaching seriously, churches do not know what to do with singles. So they do nothing.

We have worked at this in this church, because we have always had single believers in the congregation, and because we're too small to have a singles group and a married group. But church life is best when these two groups are not divided, but rather that church life is deliberately organized to be comfortable for singles and marrieds equally.

God and real life. This chapter shows God's interest in practical realities of life. In this 1 Cor 7, that means God's interest in what it is actually like to be married, and what it is actually like to be single.

God knows about the difficulties of living single, and so God holds up marriage. God knows about the difficulties of being married, and so God recommends living single.

These are not the usual ways in which God calls people. It is the way God thinks and treats us, but usually God's call comes based on other things.

God loves the world, and is restoring the world. What we must always remember is that the world God loves is not a perfect world, but our real world; it is not the old Biblical world, it is the real world. God loves our real world, and he's works in our real world.

And the people that God loves are not some quaint people we see in pictures, or people described in the Bible, or a bunch of good people out there somewhere. God loves real people: you younger people, God loves the real students in your school, the real teachers.

God loves the real people we work with, and that we meet in stores and in church and in driving on the highways. God loves real people in the real world.

And out of that comes God's interest in what it is actually like to live single, and what it is actually like to live married.

God can feel the pulse of our daily life, the joys and struggles of each person's daily life. And his call to us about living married and living single is full of God's intimate knowledge of ordinary earthy lives.

God does not simply lower rules from on high, even if they are impossible to keep. He knows about real life, he loves the real people in this real world, and that love is woven into all of his dealings with us.