

## Chapter 9: God’s Call to the Single and to the Married

### *1 Corinthians 7:1–40*

After saying so much about the dangers of sexual immorality in 1 Corinthians 5 and 6, the Corinthians may be wondering whether there is *any* place for sexual intimacy in the life of a true believer. Indeed, many of the Corinthians seem to have held a complex and semi-contradictory view of human sexuality that was common in the ancient world. While, on the one hand, there was a sense that sexual immorality had no real capacity to damage us (1 Cor. 6:12–20), there was also, on the other hand, a belief that a life in the bond of marriage (including marital sexual intimacy) was low, crass, and unspiritual. Perhaps, given Paul’s extensive arguments against sexual immorality and his own life of singleness, the Corinthians may have believed that Paul would take their side in rejecting marriage altogether or, at least, to encourage a life of celibacy for those who were already married.

This interpretation, however, would be very mistaken. While Paul does encourage a life of singleness for some, it is not for the reasons that the Corinthians expect. Moreover, Paul offers here some of the strongest statements in all of the Bible on the holiness, and the enduring obligations and duties, of marriage—including sexual intimacy. So, while Paul offers strong reasons to remain single, if possible, he urges everyone, whether married or single, circumcised or uncircumcised, slave or free, to live only in light of the eternity that looms over all of us. That is, *regardless of whether we marry in the Lord, God calls us to holy devotion to the Lord.*

### **Marriage and Singleness (1 Cor. 7:1–16)**

In 1 Corinthians 7:1, Paul introduces a new topic with the phrase “Now concerning....” By this, Paul indicates that he is turning attention to the matters about which the Corinthians wrote to him. For the first six chapters of this letter, Paul wrote about his own concerns in Corinth by challenging their lofty view of their own wisdom with the gospel of Christ crucified, addressing their divisions with an appeal to unity, correcting their rejection of his apostolic authority, and commanding them to pursue greater holiness, especially by instituting process of formal church discipline.<sup>1</sup> Paul’s own concerns that he has addressed thus far seem to arise not from what the Corinthians themselves asked Paul, but from the reports he has heard about the state of the church from Chloe’s people (1 Cor. 1:11; 5:1).<sup>2</sup> Now that Paul has torn down the Corinthians’ basic assumptions about the message, ministry, and holiness of Christianity and rebuilt their understanding upon Christ and him crucified, he finally takes up the Corinthians’ own questions. Paul will use this transition, “Now concerning...”

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<sup>1</sup> Hays, *First Corinthians*, 111.

<sup>2</sup> David R. Helm, “Context,” in *First Principles*. <<https://simeontrust.org/lessons/context/>> Accessed September 10, 2019.

several times through the rest of this letter to introduce new topics that he takes up in response to the Corinthians’ own inquiries (1 Cor. 7:1, 25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1, 12).<sup>3</sup>

### The Goodness of Celibacy (1 Cor. 7:1)

Here, Paul addresses one of the Corinthians’ questions about marriage (cf. 1 Cor. 7:25). Although Paul is now addressing the Corinthians’ concerns rather than his own, it is clear that Paul strategically addressed his own concerns about sexual immorality in Corinth earlier in order to lead up to his answer to the Corinthians’ questions (1 Cor. 5:1–13; 6:12–20). Some commentators understand the statement, “It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman” (1 Cor. 7:1), to express Paul’s own position; however, it is better to recognize that Paul is quoting the Corinthians themselves here.<sup>4</sup> As we will see, Paul agrees with this statement in part, but he sharply corrects the way this statement has apparently been misunderstood and abused.

Additionally, by recognizing that Paul is responding to the Corinthians’ statements, we gain important perspective on the limitations of what Paul says here: he is addressing “specific difficulties that have developed in Corinth and is not presenting a marriage manual or his systematic thoughts on marriage.”<sup>5</sup> To gain a full biblical understanding of marriage, we must incorporate what Paul teaches here with what he teaches elsewhere (especially Eph. 5:22–33), as well as what the whole of the Bible teaches on the subject. Paul does personally prefer celibacy, and he believes that the “present distress” should lead the Corinthians likewise to consider seriously the prospect of pursuing celibacy for themselves (1 Cor. 7:26).<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, the fact that celibacy is *good* does not also mean that sexual intimacy in marriage is *wrong*.<sup>7</sup> On the contrary, Paul believes that marriage is a holy institution ordained and blessed by God at creation (Gen. 1:27–28; 2:24).<sup>8</sup> Therefore, neither

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<sup>3</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 272.

<sup>4</sup> Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 305–06.

<sup>5</sup> Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 242.

<sup>6</sup> Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 108–09.

<sup>7</sup> Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1, 222–23. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom39.xiv.i.html>>

<sup>8</sup> “It is evident that there was a diversity of opinion on the subject of marriage among the Corinthian Christians. Probably some of them of Jewish origin thought it obligatory, while other members of the church thought it undesirable, if not wrong. Paul says, It is good for a man not to marry. The word *good* (καλόν) here means expedient, profitable, as it does frequently elsewhere, Matt. 17, 4, 18, 8, 9. 1 Cor. 9, 15. That the Apostle does not mean to teach either that marriage is morally an evil as compared with celibacy, or that as a general rule it is inexpedient, is evident. 1. Because in the following verse he declares directly the reverse. 2. Because in v. 26 he expressly states that ‘the present distress,’ or the peculiar circumstances of trial and difficulty in which the Christians of that day were placed, was the ground of his advice on this subject. 3. Because in 1 Tim. 4, 3, he specifies ‘forbidding to marry’ as one of the signs of the great apostasy which he predicted was to occur. 4. Because marriage is a divine institution, having its foundation in the nature of man, and therefore must be a good. God accordingly declared, ‘It is not good for man to be alone,’ i.e. to be unmarried, Gen. 2, 18. Paul cannot be understood in a sense which would make him directly contradict the word of God. 5. Because throughout the Scriptures marriage is spoken of as honourable, Heb. 13, 4, and is used to illustrate the relation between God and his people, and between Christ and his church. 6. Because all experience teaches that it is, as a general rule, necessary to the full development of the character of the individual, and absolutely essential to

marriage or sexual intimacy within marriage is merely a “necessary evil.” So, after first acknowledging that abstaining from sexual relations is “good” for the unmarried, Paul then goes on to insist upon the goodness and necessity of sexual relations between married couples.

### The Goodness of Marital Sexual Intimacy (1 Cor. 7:2–4)

Paul gives three reasons for married couples to continue engaging in sexual intimacy. First, Paul offers an intensely practical reason: to avoid temptations to sexual immorality (1 Cor. 7:2). Very literally, Paul’s caution reads, “because of/on account of sexual immoralities (plural).” This warning refers to the acts of sexual immorality “that would result if marriage were prohibited or should cease.”<sup>9</sup> Wherever people without the gift of continency (cf. 1 Cor. 7:7) try to repress their sexual desires, rather than expressing them in marriage, sexual immorality will increase. Therefore, Paul prescribes a straightforward remedy: each man should *have* his own wife, and each woman should *have* her own husband—that is, that each should *have* his or her own spouse *sexually* (1 Cor. 7:2). The idea of *having* a wife or *having* a husband does not merely mean to “get married,” since Paul uses a different verb “to marry” only a few verses later in this passage (1 Cor. 7:9).<sup>10</sup> Earlier, Paul expressed an act of egregious sexual immorality when he cited the report he had received, that a man in Corinth “has” his father’s wife (1 Cor. 5:1).<sup>11</sup> Thus, for a man to *have* a woman (or a woman to *have* a man) is a biblical idiom that refers to sexual intimacy.

Second, Paul cites the obligations of husbands to wives, and the obligations of wives to husbands. The word that the ESV translates as “conjugal rights” literally means “debt” (1 Cor. 7:3; cf. Matt. 18:32). In this instance, the *debt* owed refers to the fullness of marital obligations, particularly the sexual obligations that the husband owes to his wife, and the wife to her husband. Now, we must mention two caveats here: (1) Paul is not emphasizing one spouse’s rights to *demand* sex from the other, but rather each spouse’s *obligation* to the other.<sup>12</sup> (2) as we mentioned earlier, Paul is not writing a full treatise on marriage, but only dealing with questions about the necessity of sexual intimacy within marriage. Therefore, he treats other obligations that husbands owe to their wives,

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the virtue and the well-being of society. To depreciate marriage would be to go contrary both to nature and revelation, and such depreciation has never failed to be attended by the most injurious consequences to the church and to the world. If, therefore, Scripture is to be interpreted by Scripture, we must understand the Apostle as intending to say: ‘Considering your peculiar circumstances, it is expedient for you not to marry.’” (Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 108–09.)

<sup>9</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 274.

<sup>10</sup> “His response to their slogan—and remedy for the cases of porneia—is (lit.): ‘Let each man be having his own wife, and each woman be having her own husband.’ This sentence in particular presented every kind of difficulty for the traditional view [that Paul had a low view of marriage and sexual intimacy in marriage]. First, it does not say that people should get married, a verb Paul is obviously willing to use in this section when he intends that (v. 9). Second, there is no known evidence that the idiom ‘to have a wife’ means ‘to take a wife.’ In fact this idiom is common in biblical Greek and usually means either to ‘have sexually’ (Exod. 2:1; Deut. 28:30; Isa. 13:16) or simply to be married or to be in continuing sexual relations with a man or a woman (see esp. 5:1 and 7:29; cf. Mark 6:18; John 4:18).” (Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 309.)

<sup>11</sup> Hays, *First Corinthians*, 113–14.

<sup>12</sup> “And Paul’s emphasis, it must be noted, is not on ‘You owe me,’ but on ‘I owe you.’” (Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 310.)

and that wives owe to their husbands, elsewhere (e.g., Eph. 5:33).<sup>13</sup>

Third, Paul reminds husbands and wives of the authority that they have entrusted to each other in marriage.<sup>14</sup> Paul writes (unsurprisingly in the standards of his day) that the wife does not have authority over her own body, but that her husband does. Then, he continues to explain (shockingly to the standards of his day) that the husband does not have authority over his own body, but his wife does.<sup>15</sup> Paul fully writes out the exact same phrase to wives *and* husbands, rather than simply summarizing the second half of the statement with “likewise” alone, without repeating the verb, as he did in v. 3.<sup>16</sup> Paul seems to recognize that, while husbands and wives may recognize certain debts they owe to another, it would be more controversial to suggest that wives also have authority over their husbands’ bodies. So, he spells this idea out fully. Importantly, this does not negate the requirement of wives to submit to the authority of their husbands in other areas (cf. Eph. 5:22). Instead, this means that, when it comes to the husband’s obligation to provide sexual intimacy to his wife, she has authority over how her husband uses his body.

### The Requirement of Marital Sexual Intimacy (1 Cor. 7:5–6)

Lest the Corinthians conclude that sexual intimacy in marriage is good, but merely optional, Paul goes further. He does not simply encourage such intimacy, but he commands married couples not to “deprive” one another (1 Cor. 7:5). Earlier, Paul referred to the obligation of sexual intimacy in marriage as a “debt” or “obligation,” and here he takes that logic one step further by arguing that one spouse actually *defrauds* another by withholding sex. Indeed, this word “deprive” is the same word that appeared in the last chapter when Paul accused the Corinthians of *defrauding* one another through their lawsuits (1 Cor. 6:7–8).<sup>17</sup>

What about very spiritual pursuits, though? Is it possible for spouses to relieve one another of their sexual obligations to each other so that they can devote themselves spiritually to God?<sup>18</sup> Paul acknowledges that it would be permissible to deprive one another of sexual intimacy for the purpose of devotion to prayer;<sup>19</sup> however, Paul puts strict conditions on such a deprivation. This deprivation must be (1) by mutual, not unilateral, agreement; (2) for only a very limited time; and (3) concluded by coming together again for sexual intimacy (1 Cor. 7:5). While such an agreement may be

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<sup>13</sup> Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1, 225–26. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom39.xiv.ii.html>>

<sup>14</sup> The verb ἐξουσιάζω (“have authority”) is closely related to the impersonal ἔξεστιν (“It is lawful”) that Paul used earlier in 1 Corinthians 6:12.

<sup>15</sup> Schreiner, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 136.

<sup>16</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 276.

<sup>17</sup> Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 312.

<sup>18</sup> The idea for the verb σχολάζω (“devote”) has to do with leisure in being freed from an obligation in order to devote oneself to something else. We get our word “school” from this word, the idea being that students should be freed from the obligations of working in order to have *leisure* necessary to devote themselves to study.

<sup>19</sup> While some manuscripts have “fasting and prayer” (e.g., KJV), the shorter version of “prayer” alone “is decisively supported by all the early and best witnesses.” (Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart, Germany: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994), 488.)

permissible, God forbids us from forfeiting marital sexual intimacy in order to pursue prayer perpetually.<sup>20</sup> We were created to express sexual urges in marriage, and to refrain from marital sex weakens us and makes us easy prey for Satan to lead into sexual immorality: “This may not flatter our human nature but it certainly fortifies by honestly naming the weak point....Satan is here pictured as being constantly on the watch to bring Christ’s followers to fall. It must be our purpose to thwart his nefarious attempts.”<sup>21</sup> We should not try to be more spiritual than God has created us to be.

In this context, we can understand the exact nature of the “concession” (1 Cor. 7:6) Paul is making. Some have argued that by the word “concession,” Paul is begrudgingly *conceding* that some level of sexual intimacy in marriage should take place—necessary, but not ideal. This, however, is not at all his meaning. On the contrary, Paul is conceding that, under very specific circumstances and only for a limited time, married couples may *abstain* from sexual intimacy—but this arrangement is in no way required, and Paul grants it only as a concession.<sup>22</sup> Sexual intimacy is the rule, and abstention is the rare, conceded exception.

Although we do not have all the details, it seems that the Corinthians have asked Paul to affirm that married couples may indeed refrain from sexual intimacy. Furthermore, it seems that at least some of their rationale for refraining from sexual intimacy has to do with devoting themselves to prayer. Strange as it may seem to modern readers, “sexual abstinence was widely viewed as a means to personal wholeness and religious power.”<sup>23</sup> While such abstinence may be permissible, it may only

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<sup>20</sup> “Profane persons might think that Paul does not act with sufficient modesty in discoursing in this manner as to the intercourse of a husband with his wife; or at least that it was unbecoming the dignity of an Apostle. If, however, we consider the reasons that influenced him, we shall find that he was under the necessity of speaking of these things. In the first place, he knew how much influence a false appearance of sanctity has in beguiling devout minds, as we ourselves know by experience. For Satan dazzles us with an appearance of what is right, that we may be led to imagine that we are polluted by intercourse with our wives, and leaving off our calling, may think of pursuing another kind of life.” (Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1, 226. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom39.xiv.ii.html>>

<sup>21</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 278–79.

<sup>22</sup> “Augustine and others believed that the concession was the permission to marry and to engage in sexual relations, and, if this reading is correct, Paul’s stance towards marriage and sex is quite negative. Such an interpretation of Paul has exerted considerable influence throughout church history. There are good reasons, however, for rejecting this interpretation. The word *this (touto)* almost certainly refers to the subject discussed in verse 5; thus Paul concedes that the Corinthians may refrain from sexual relations for a brief period of time if they so wish. The correct interpretation is thus diametrically opposed to the Augustinian reading. Paul does not concede that marriage and sexual relations are permissible; he concedes that married couples may abstain from sexual relations for a short period of time if they so desire. Another way of putting it is that there is no requirement or even inclination on Paul’s part to recommend temporary periods of abstinence for married couples. If they wish to refrain from sex, well and good, but Paul does not think such a provision is necessary or required.” (Schreiner, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 136–37.)

<sup>23</sup> “This sort of asceticism was ‘in the air’ in ancient Mediterranean culture. The Stoic and Cynic philosophical schools—whose thought, as we have seen, significantly influenced the Corinthians—debated whether a philosopher should marry or whether the unmarried state was more conducive to the pursuit of wisdom. In Greek popular religion, virginity and sexual purity were often associated with those set aside for the service of the gods, particularly for women who were prophets—the priestess of the oracle at Delphi, for

occur by mutual agreement and for a limited time.

### Different Gifts (1 Cor. 7:7–9)

For reasons that Paul will spell out later in this chapter, Paul wishes that all lived in the state of singleness as he does (1 Cor. 7:7). Importantly, though, Paul acknowledges that his singleness is not merely his *circumstance*, but his *gift*. Furthermore, he acknowledges that not all have the same gift—one has one kind of gift, and another has another kind of gift. Specifically, Paul has the gift of *continency*—that is, his desires are *contained* so that he does not need marriage in the way that others do. So, while he encourages as many unmarried and widows to remain single, as Paul is, he also acknowledges that this life is not for everyone (1 Cor. 7:8–9). Some have the gift of continency, and others do not. Jesus affirms the same thing:

[11] But he said to them, “Not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given. [12] For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let the one who is able to receive this receive it.” (Matt. 19:11–12)

Only to those whom God has given the gift of continency can make themselves eunuchs (that is, refrain from marriage) for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.

What is the nature of this gift? Paul describes this gift as self-control over *desires*. Those who do not have self-control over their desires should marry, while those with the gift of continency do not need to marry. The word for “self-control” is *enkrateuomai*, and it is based on the word *kratos*, meaning “power.” In other words, “self-control” is power over oneself—here, in the area of sexual desire. Paul used the opposite of this word, *akrasian*; lit., “without power”), in v. 5: “so that Satan may not tempt you because of your *lack of self-control*.” Originally, the word for “self-control” was closely related with the philosophical ideas of the Stoics: “Among the Stoics, [*enkrateia*] was taken as a sign of human freedom; it was part of being truly human to moderate one’s desires, [particularly] one’s sexual drive and enjoyment of food and drink. The Neo-Pythagoreans developed a dualistic system: the body must be kept in check through asceticism, so that the soul may rise to God.”<sup>24</sup>

Paul uses this word in a very different sense, however. The gospel is not Stoicism, where we are called to exercise rigorous, outward control over our raging, internal desires. Rather, the gospel promises to transform us from the inside out, first in our desires and then in our actions. Those who possess the gift of continency have a supernatural, spiritual gift of “entire self-mastery as to the sexual life and freedom from temptation in this regard.”<sup>25</sup> To those without the gift of continency, the

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example. In Paul’s day, even Judaism, which classically had celebrated procreation as the duty of everyone, developed ascetic movements such as the Essenes and the Therapeutae about whom Philo of Alexandria wrote glowingly. Difficult as it may be for many at the end of the twentieth century to appreciate, sexual abstinence was widely viewed as a means to personal wholeness and religious power.” (Hays, *First Corinthians*, 114.)

<sup>24</sup> “ἐγκράτεια,” *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*, 2nd ed., ed. Moisés Silva, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 83–84.

<sup>25</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 281.

gospel does not place a burden of white-knuckled celibacy. In fact, apart from the gift of continency, it would be foolish to avoid marriage and to continue to “burn with passion” (1 Cor. 7:9). In order to avoid sexual immorality, Westminster Larger Catechism Question #138 teaches that pursuing marriage is a duty of those without the gift of continency. While the Stoics expected ongoing *burning*, they believed that self-control could be achieved by refraining from giving into their desires. For Paul, however, the gift of continency is a supernatural gift that gives people mastery over not only their *actions*, but also their *desires*.

Even the early church father Clement of Alexandria (150–215 AD) recognized the radical difference between human (Greek) ideas of self-control and God’s idea of spiritual self-control:

The human ideal of self-control (*enkrateia*), I mean the one found among the Greek philosophers, consists in struggling against lust (*epithumia*), and in not yielding to it so as to manifest its deeds. But among us self-control means not to experience lust at all. Our aim is not merely to be self-controlled while still experiencing lust in the heart, but rather to be self-controlled even over lust itself. but this kind of self-control is attained only by the grace of God.<sup>26</sup>

Clement of Alexandria was often criticized for imposing too much Greek Philosophy over Christian theology, but in this case, he recognizes the incongruity of Stoicism with Christianity. God does not call anyone to pursue a life of Stoic singleness. Therefore, those with the gift of continency achieve self-control over lust by a supernatural gift, while those with the gift of marriage achieve self-control over lust by giving themselves sexually to their spouses. Both continency and marriage are God’s grace toward us in dealing with our sexual desires.

### The Lord’s Command Concerning Divorce (1 Cor. 7:10–11)

Next, Paul turns to address the situation of the married who were, for whatever reason, contemplating divorce.<sup>27</sup> Rather than offering his own instruction, Paul reminds the Corinthians of the teaching of the Lord—that is, the Lord Jesus (1 Cor. 7:10).<sup>28</sup> Jesus taught clearly that God created marriage to be “an indissoluble bond.”<sup>29</sup> Therefore, husbands may not divorce their wives, except in cases of sexual immorality (Matt. 5:31–32; 19:1–12; Mark 10:2–12; Luke 16:18). Because this command comes directly from Jesus, Paul does not feel the need to argue this point again. He does, however, apply to *wives* what Jesus commanded to *husbands*: neither the husband nor the wife may

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<sup>26</sup> Clement of Alexandria, “Miscellanies, Book 3,” in *Marriage and Sexuality in Early Christianity*, ed. David G. Hunter (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018), 77.

<sup>27</sup> “Paul now turns his attention back to married couples within the church. If continuing sexual relations are mandatory for Christian husbands and wives, might some of them seek an escape route into celibacy by means of divorce? Had this perhaps already been occurring in Corinth? Or had the issue of divorce arisen for other, more ordinary reasons?” (Hays, *First Corinthians*, 119.)

<sup>28</sup> Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 112–13.

<sup>29</sup> Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1, 238. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom39.xiv.iv.html>>

divorce the other.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, Paul reveals more of the implications of Jesus’ teaching by revealing that, in the case where a wife separates from her husband, she should only remain unmarried or, eventually, reconcile with her husband. Unless sexual immorality or willful desertion (1 Cor. 7:15) has *already* broken the marriage covenant, Christians are forbidden from initiating a breaking of their marriage covenant by pursuing divorce.<sup>31</sup> If they must separate, they must recognize that they are still bound to their spouses to the degree that remarriage to someone else is forbidden. While we observe that Paul uses different words to refer to the action of the wife “separate” compared to the action of the husband “divorce” in these verses, ultimately Paul is describing the same activity: the husband divorces his wife by sending her away, and the wife divorces her husband by separating from him.<sup>32</sup>

### The Apostolic Command Concerning Mixed Marriages (1 Cor. 7:12–16)

In v. 12, Paul indicates that *he* is giving these instructions, “not the Lord.” Does this mean that what Paul writes here in 1 Corinthians 7:12–16 is nothing more than pious advice, offered for our consideration, but not quite authoritative? Absolutely not. While Jesus gave some instructions against divorce, there “are some other questions about marriage, on which Jesus had no occasion to speak while he was here on earth.”<sup>33</sup> We believe that the whole Bible is the Word of God, including the words Jesus spoke during his earthly ministry *and* the words that the Holy Spirit inspired the prophets and apostles to write. Paul’s instructions in 1 Corinthians 7:12–16, then, record the command that the Holy Spirit inspired the Apostle Paul to write for the benefit of the church through the ages.<sup>34</sup> Because Paul clearly distinguishes what Jesus taught from what he is teaching, we gain confidence that Paul did not put words into Jesus’ mouth to buttress his own arguments.<sup>35</sup> Some things Jesus explicitly taught during his earthly ministry, but Jesus himself said that he had much more to teach, and he promised to send his Holy Spirit to lead the church into all truth (John 16:12–

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<sup>30</sup> Hays, *First Corinthians*, 120.

<sup>31</sup> “But although the marriage bond cannot be dissolved by any human authority, because it is, in virtue of the law of God, a covenant for life between one man and one woman; yet it can be annulled, not rightfully indeed, but still effectually. Adultery annuls it, because it is a breach of the specific contract involved in marriage. And so does, for the same reason, wilful desertion, as the apostle teaches in a following verse.” (Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 112.)

<sup>32</sup> “Much has been made of the use of the verb ‘to separate oneself from,’ in distinction from the verb used later (vv. 12–13), ‘to divorce.’ But that probably reflects our own urgencies for greater precision. Divorce in Greco-Roman culture could be legalized by means of documents, but more often it simply happened. In this culture divorce was divorce, whether established by a document or not. Either the man sent his wife away (= ‘divorce’ in the sense of v. 12), or else either of them ‘left’ the other (= ‘to separate’). But the evidence is ambiguous as far as the verbs are concerned. Ordinarily when the wife ‘divorces,’ she simply leaves her husband (‘is separated’ from him); the same verb is used a bit later (v. 15) of an unbelieving partner of either sex who leaves, and it occurs regularly in the papyri for mutual divorce (agreeing to ‘separate from each other’). On the other hand, a man ordinarily ‘divorced’ his wife (‘sent her away’); nonetheless Paul assumes (v. 13) that the wife can do the same.” (Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 324–25.)

<sup>33</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 286.

<sup>34</sup> Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 112.

<sup>35</sup> Barnett, *1 Corinthians: Holiness and Hope of a Rescued People*, 115–16.



15). We are seeing an example of this principle here.

By the Holy Spirit, then, Paul teaches that when a believer has an unbelieving spouse who consents to remain in the marriage, the believer must not divorce his or her spouse (1 Cor. 7:12–13). In v. 14, Paul gives the justification (“for”) behind this command by insisting that the unbelieving spouse is, in some way, rendered holy by the believing spouse. What does this mean? First, the concern seems to stem from the general old covenant principle that uncleanness contaminated what was clean and holy, not the other way around. This principle is taught throughout the Old Testament, but perhaps most clearly illustrated in the prophet Haggai:<sup>36</sup>

[11] “Thus says the LORD of hosts: Ask the priests about the law: [12] ‘If someone carries holy meat in the fold of his garment and touches with his fold bread or stew or wine or oil or any kind of food, does it become holy?’” The priests answered and said, “No.” [13] Then Haggai said, “If someone who is unclean by contact with a dead body touches any of these, does it become unclean?” The priests answered and said, “It does become unclean.” (Hag. 2:11–13)

Under the old covenant, what is holy *cannot*, on its own, make something else holy, but what is unclean *can*, on its own, make something else unclean.

In the case of marriage specifically, the Old Testament was even clearer: God’s people must *not* remain married unbelievers. In part, God forbade intermarriage with foreign peoples (who worshiped foreign gods) explicitly in various places (Deut. 7:1–5; Josh. 23:12–13). More than that, the Old Testament gives various examples of how intermarriage with unbelieving foreigners led God’s people into the worship of foreign gods (Judg. 3:5–7; 1 Kgs. 11:1–5). Most importantly for the purposes of understanding 1 Corinthians 7:14, we should remember that, under Ezra’s leadership, God’s people entered into a covenant with God by promising to *divorce* all their foreign wives after recognizing that their marriages were forbidden (Ezra 10:3). This provision did not apply, however, when the foreigners forsook their old gods in order to worship Yahweh alone, by faith. So, in the cases of the Canaanite prostitute, Rahab, and the Moabitess, Ruth, these two women were immediately grafted fully into the covenant community without restriction (Josh 6:25; Ruth 2:10–12; 4:13–22). Why? Because these women renounced their pagan gods and put their faith in Yahweh (Josh 2:8–13; Ruth 1:16–17). By faith, these foreigners became true Israelites (cf. Rom. 2:29).

In 1 Corinthians 7:12–14, though, Paul is addressing the spouses who had *not* believed. Didn’t the Old Testament teach that believers must divorce their foreign wives? Furthermore, hadn’t Paul just finished explaining that sexual immorality with a prostitute defiled a believer in a unique way (1 Cor. 6:12–20)?<sup>37</sup> If so, then would remaining in a marriage with an unbeliever similarly defile the believer? Here, Paul states clearly that, under the new covenant, marriage to an unbeliever (including the required sexual intimacy; cf. 1 Cor. 7:1–5) will *not* defile the believer. In this case, the believer makes the unbeliever holy, rather than unbeliever defiling the believer. For the unbeliever, this holiness does not refer to any personal, subjective holiness that comes as a result of faith in Jesus

<sup>36</sup> Schreiner, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 142.

<sup>37</sup> Hays, *First Corinthians*, 121.

Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 1:2), but holiness in the sense of being set apart and consecrated to the Lord.<sup>38</sup> In regard to their ongoing relationship to unbelieving spouses, God makes stronger promises to believers under the new covenant than he had under the old covenant. In the new covenant, God makes unbelieving spouses holy in order to protect the holiness of believers.

Second, the general old covenant principle that unclean things defiled clean and holy things had a more specific application to exclude the children of mixed marriages from the covenant community. For example, Moses proclaims:

[2] “No one born of a forbidden union may enter the assembly of the LORD. Even to the tenth generation, none of his descendants may enter the assembly of the LORD. [3] “No Ammonite or Moabite may enter the assembly of the LORD. Even to the tenth generation, none of them may enter the assembly of the LORD forever, [4] because they did not meet you with bread and with water on the way, when you came out of Egypt, and because they hired against you Balaam the son of Beor from Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse you.” (Deut. 23:2–4)

This principle is restated in the prophet Malachi:

[11] Judah has been faithless, and abomination has been committed in Israel and in Jerusalem. For Judah has profaned the sanctuary of the LORD, which he loves, and has married the daughter of a foreign god. [12] May the LORD cut off from the tents of Jacob any descendant of the man who does this, who brings an offering to the LORD of hosts! (Mal. 2:11–12)

Importantly, we should recognize that these were marriages to *unbelieving* Gentiles (“the daughter of a foreign god”; Mal. 2:11), not to *all* Gentiles. As mentioned earlier, in the cases of Rahab and Ruth, no such restrictions were put on their children—including the Canaanite Rahab’s great-great grandson (4<sup>th</sup> generation), and the Moabitess Ruth’s great grandson (3<sup>rd</sup> generation), David (Matt. 1:5).

Paul teaches, however, that the new covenant provides *stronger* promises not only to the believers *married* to unbelievers (as noted above), but also to their *children* than under the old covenant. Under the new covenant, it is not the *uncleaness* of the unbeliever that is the determining factor for

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<sup>38</sup> “We have already seen that the word (ἁγιάζειν), *to sanctify*, means, 1. To cleanse. 2. To render morally pure. 3. To consecrate, to regard as sacred, and hence, to reverence or to hallow. Examples of the use of the word in the third general sense just mentioned are to be found in all parts of Scripture. Any person or thing consecrated to God, or employed in his service, the temple, its utensils, the sacrifices, the priests, the whole theocratical people, are called holy. Persons or things not thus consecrated are called profane, common, unclean. To transfer any person or thing from this latter class to the former, is to sanctify him or it....The Hebrew people were sanctified (i.e. consecrated), by being selected from other nations and devoted to the service of the true God. They were, therefore, constantly called holy. All who joined them, or who were intimately connected with them, became in the same sense, holy.” (Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 115.)

classifying the status of the children. Rather, the *holiness* of the believer prevails, so that the children are considered holy in a way that would not have been true under similar marriages in the old covenant. Here again we see the sense in which the unbelieving spouse is considered *holy*—not as though the unbeliever were personally holy apart from faith, but that he or she is merely consecrated as holy for the sake of protecting the personal holiness of the children of a believer.<sup>39</sup> Unbelieving spouses are consecrated holy not for their own sake, but for the sake of protecting the holiness of the believing spouses and the children. Along these lines, if the New Testament clearly teaches that the children of believers are *themselves* holy to the Lord, then by what right would we ever withhold from them the privileges of membership in the visible church, including the sign of baptism?<sup>40</sup>

Even so, Paul acknowledges that the unbelieving spouse may still wish to separate (1 Cor. 7:15). While Paul insists that believers may not initiate a divorce from their spouses, Paul acknowledges that believers are not “held hostage” (“bound”) to marriages after the willful desertion of an unbelieving spouse.<sup>41</sup> Importantly, Paul is not attempting to create a loophole for people to exploit. Paul insists that God has called us to peace, not to give us an excuse to opt out of disappointing marriages. Charles Hodge puts this well:

Peace is the state in which the called should live. The gospel was not designed to break up families or to separate husbands and wives. Therefore, though the believer is free if deserted by his unbelieving partner, the separation should be avoided if possible. Let them live together if they can; and let all proper means be taken to bring the unbelieving party to a sense of duty, and to induce him to fulfil the marriage covenant. Others understand it in a directly opposite sense, viz., as assigning a reason why the separation should take place, or at least why the attempt to detain an unwilling husband or wife should not be pressed too far. ‘As God hath called us to live in peace, it is contrary to the nature of our vocation to keep up these ill-assorted connections.’ This, however, is contrary to the whole animus of the apostle. He is evidently labouring throughout these verses to prevent all unnecessary disruptions of social ties.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> “The very words teach that this sanctification regards the unbelieving parent, *not for his own sake*, but as a *medium*, affecting the transmission of covenant privileges to the children of a believer. The question was, whether, in the case of one of the parties in the marriage-relation being a Pagan, and the other a Christian, the former or the latter should determine the relation of the offspring to the church, or whether neither should. The answer is, that in this case, where the argument for the children seems to be perfectly balanced by the argument against them, God has graciously inclined the scale in *favor* of his people; so that, for the purpose of conveying to their infants the privilege of being within his covenant and church, the unbelieving partner is sanctified by the believing. It must be thus or the reverse.” (T. E. Peck, *Notes on Ecclesiology*, 2nd ed. (Richmond, VA: The Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1892), 48–49.)

<sup>40</sup> “But if the children of believers are exempted from the common lot of mankind, so as to be set apart to the Lord, why should we keep them back from the sign? If the Lord admits them into the Church by his word, why should we refuse them the sign?” (Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1, 243. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom39.xiv.iv.html>>)

<sup>41</sup> Barnett, *1 Corinthians: Holiness and Hope of a Rescued People*, 119.

<sup>42</sup> Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 118–19.

Still, Paul is indeed acknowledging painful realities that some unbelievers will abandon their spouses after conversions to faith in Christ.

Jesus perhaps alluded to this reality when he insisted that discipleship requires us to “hate” our wife in comparison to the love and obedience we must extend to Jesus (Luke 14:26). Christ requires our first allegiance, but our spouses require our second allegiance. Only in such cases where our spouses refuse to remain with us because of our allegiance to Christ do we have the right to divorce.<sup>43</sup> Believers are not held hostage to their marriages when their spouses desert them. But, after making every effort to protect their marriages, they also should not try to hold their unbelieving spouses hostage. If the unbelieving spouse insists upon deserting the believer, “let it be so” (1 Cor. 7:15). Indeed, God may use believing spouses as the means by which he brings unbelieving spouses to faith (1 Cor. 7:16).<sup>44</sup> The expression “How do you know...?” or “Who knows...?” is used in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) to express the hope that something positive may happen (2 Sam. 12:22; Joel 2:14; Jon. 3:9).<sup>45</sup>

### The Lord’s Assignments for Our Lives (1 Cor. 7:17–24)

What Paul has written concerning marriage is not different from the way that Christians are to relate to the rest of our lives, but rather an illustration of a general rule.<sup>46</sup> Whether single or married, Paul urged the Corinthians to remain as they were. Now, Paul applies this principle much further to demonstrate that our relationship to Christ is “compatible with any social relation or position.”<sup>47</sup> In part, this means that we may serve Christ fully in whatever circumstances we find ourselves, no matter how unpleasant those circumstances may be.<sup>48</sup> Beyond this, Paul is teaching that our various relationships with other *people* are transformed and given new meaning by our relationship to God through Christ. Therefore, we are “no better off, or worse, being in one condition or the other.”<sup>49</sup>

In this section, Paul addresses the *callings* that Christians receive. When Paul uses the term “calling,” he does not refer to what we mean by “vocations”—that is, Paul does not use the word “calling” to describe the various relationships, work, and situations that the Lord has “assigned” to us (1 Cor. 7:17). We *do* have various assignments and gifts (1 Cor. 7:7) from the Lord, but the term *calling* refers to God’s *effectual calling* to us unto salvation. The Westminster Larger Catechism

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<sup>43</sup> “Although the corruption of man be such as is apt to study arguments unduly to put asunder those whom God hath joined together in marriage: yet, nothing but adultery, or such willful desertion as can no way be remedied by the church, or civil magistrate, is cause sufficient of dissolving the bond of marriage...” (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, 24.6)

<sup>44</sup> Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1, 244–45. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom39.xiv.iv.html>>

<sup>45</sup> Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 119–20.

<sup>46</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 297–98.

<sup>47</sup> Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 120.

<sup>48</sup> Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1, 245–46. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom39.xiv.iv.html>>

<sup>49</sup> Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 340.

Question #67 defines effectual calling in this way:

Effectual calling is the work of God’s almighty power and grace, whereby (out of his free and special love to his elect, and from nothing in them moving him thereunto) he doth, in his accepted time, invite and draw them to Jesus Christ, by his word and Spirit; savingly enlightening their minds, renewing and powerfully determining their wills, so as they (although in themselves dead in sin) are hereby made willing and able freely to answer his call, and to accept and embrace the grace offered and conveyed therein.<sup>50</sup>

This call “transcends and transforms all external circumstances,” so that we may be content in whatever life circumstances we may find ourselves in at the time of our calling.<sup>51</sup> As C. K. Barrett so helpfully comments, “These verses show that Paul is not thinking primarily of a vocation *to* which a man is called, but of the condition *in* which a man is when the converting call of God comes to him and summons him to the life of Christian faith and obedience. There is at least a presumption that the Lord will wish the convert to stay where he is.”<sup>52</sup> Paul insists that he teaches this general rule of remaining in our circumstances in all the churches (1 Cor. 7:17).

### Called While Circumcised or Uncircumcised (1 Cor. 7:18–19)

The first social situations Paul addresses are of those who are circumcised and those who are uncircumcised. If the effectual calling to salvation comes when someone is already circumcised, then that man should not seek to remove the marks of his circumcision (1 Cor. 7:18a). Paul here refers to a “surgical procedure designed to hide the evidence of circumcision as far as possible.”<sup>53</sup> On the other hand, Paul also insists that those who are uncircumcised should not seek circumcision (1 Cor. 7:18b). The outward mark of circumcision is *not* the point of the gospel, so neither circumcision or uncircumcision “counts for anything” (1 Cor. 7:19a).<sup>54</sup> Instead, what is important for those who seek to follow Christ by faith is the keeping of the commandments of God (1 Cor. 7:19b). Circumcision was given as a type to foreshadow Jesus Christ himself. Now that Christ has come, the ceremonial law of circumcision gives way to the person toward whom that ritual pointed. Ultimately, therefore, God was not interested in circumcision in itself, but in remaking a people through Christ who would keep his commandments. Ultimately, God is pursuing a people who will love the Lord their God with all their heart, soul, and mind, and who will love their neighbor as themselves (cf. Matt.

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<sup>50</sup> *Westminster Larger Catechism*, #67.

<sup>51</sup> Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 303.

<sup>52</sup> Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 168.

<sup>53</sup> “Those Jews who wished to maintain their social and business contacts with Gentiles in such contexts as the gymnasium sometimes took this step to hide their Jewish identity (cf. Maccabees 1:15; Josephus, *Antiquities* 12.5.1 and *Against Apion* 2.13.137). Circumcision could be an occasion of ridicule in some Gentile circles.” (Thiselton, *First Corinthians: A Shorter Exegetical & Pastoral Commentary*, 111.)

<sup>54</sup> Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1, 247–48. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom39.xiv.v.html>>

22:37–39).<sup>55</sup>

### Called While Slave or Free (1 Cor. 7:20–24)

In 1 Corinthians 7:20, Paul restates his general principle: “Each one, in the calling in which he was called, in this let him remain” (my translation). Although the word “calling” usually refers to our effectual calling, this is the one place that Paul comes closest to using the word “calling” in the sense of a vocation to a specific work or station in life.<sup>56</sup> Even here, though, that is not quite what Paul is saying. Rather, as R. C. H. Lenski writes, “The two parallel clauses found in v. 17 are now reduced to a unit: ‘the call wherewith he was called,’ or, in one word, ‘the call.’ The minor idea of portions in our earthly life is merged in the major blessing of the call.”<sup>57</sup> In the light of the glorious heavenly calling we have received, our earthly circumstances are relatively unimportant. Those circumstances do not constitute the call itself, but, rather, the situations in which God’s call to us in Christ Jesus is worked out. Paul has already made this case in regard to marriage/singleness and circumcision/uncircumcision. Here, Paul now extends this principle to those who live either as slaves or as free.

Importantly, Paul does not *prohibit* any change in circumstances; rather, he simply denies that any such change in circumstances is necessary.<sup>58</sup> Again, C. K. Barrett captures Paul’s teaching well:

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<sup>55</sup> “If Paul’s fellow Jews would have been scandalized by the apostle’s former statement, they would have been quite mystified by this one. From their perspective these sentences would be totally non sequitur, indeed contradictory. To be circumcised *is* to keep the commandment of God. But Paul obviously thinks otherwise. It should be noted that more than one theology in the Protestant tradition has equally had difficulty with this statement. How can Paul eliminate ‘works’ (= circumcision) and then turn about and insist on ‘works’ after all? The answer of course is that Paul did not consider obedience to the ‘commands of God’ as ‘works of the law.’ That is an unfortunate confounding of terms within some Protestant theology that Paul himself would scarcely have understood. Almost certainly this refers to the ethical imperatives of the Christian faith. One’s proper response to grace is obedience to the will of God (see the hermeneutical notes at the end of 3:1–4 and 6:7–11). In a church where spirituality had degenerated into something very close to antinomian behavior, Paul simply cannot allow a religious statement like ‘circumcision counts for nothing’ to be turned into ‘obedience to the will of God, or being conformed into Christlikeness, counts for nothing’ (cf. 9:21).” (Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 347.)

<sup>56</sup> So Hodge: “This is a repetition of the sentiment contained in v. 17, which is again repeated in v. 24. The word calling (κλησις), always in the New Testament means the call of God, that efficacious operation of his Spirit by which men are brought into the kingdom of Christ. It is hard, however, to make it bear that sense here. The meaning is plain enough. ‘As he was called, so let him remain.’ But this is the idea detached from the form in which it is here expressed. The great majority of commentators agree in giving the word in this place the sense of *vocation*, as we use that word when we speak of the vocation of a mechanic or of a farmer. In whatever station or condition a man is called, therein let him remain.” (Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 122–23.)

<sup>57</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 301–02.

<sup>58</sup> “But here it is asked, whether Paul means to establish any obligation, for it might seem as though the words conveyed this idea, that every one is bound to his calling, so that he must not abandon it. Now it were a very hard thing if a tailor were not at liberty to learn another trade, or if a merchant were not at liberty to betake himself to farming. I answer, that this is not what the Apostle intends, for he has it simply in view to correct that inconsiderate eagerness, which prompts some to change their condition without any proper

“A man is not called (so far as this passage is concerned) to a new occupation; his old occupation is given new significance.”<sup>59</sup> So, if you were a slave when called, this is nothing to be concerned about; however, if you do have an opportunity to gain freedom, it is good and right and proper to avail yourself of the opportunity (1 Cor. 7:21). Paul rejects any twisting or degrading of Christianity into a merely political and social force that disrupts and upsets “law, order, customs, etc., in anomistic [i.e., lawless], even revolutionary ways.”<sup>60</sup> On the contrary, Paul is teaching that God works out our salvation in even the most unpleasant physical circumstances.<sup>61</sup>

Does this mean that Paul endorsed the practice of slavery? To answer this question, we must first clearly define the slavery of Paul’s day, which is different from the slavery practiced in America until the 19<sup>th</sup> century:

First, slavery in the ancient Greco-Roman world was a pervasive institution, but it was not invariably perceived as oppressive. American readers instinctively think of slavery as it was practiced in the antebellum South, but the ancient reality was more complicated. Dale Martin’s book *Slavery as Salvation* has shown that slavery provided for many people not only economic security, but also upward social mobility. To be the slave of a powerful master could be an honorable station, and slaves were sometimes highly educated and entrusted with major administrative responsibility....That is why “slave of Christ” (7:22) could be an honorable designation, suggesting a position of some authority. Of course, some slaves were treated badly, and many sought emancipation when possible, sometimes through saving up money to buy their way out of slavery. The emancipated slave was still not a freeborn citizen, but a “freedman” (*apeleutheros*), who often remained attached to the service of his or her former master.<sup>62</sup>

In this context, slavery was more like our conceptions of being an employee than of being a slave as practiced in America, although these ancient slaves certainly lacked the freedom to leave for a new “job.”<sup>63</sup> Indeed, Paul encourages slaves to gain their freedom if possible (1 Cor. 7:21).

Second, we must also recognize that Paul here rejects the idea that slaves actually belong to their masters in a real sense: “For he who was called in the Lord as a bondservant is a freedman of the Lord. Likewise he who was free when called is a bondservant of Christ” (1 Cor. 7:22). This logic,

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reason, whether they do it from superstition, or from any other motive. Farther, he calls every one to this rule also — that they bear in mind what is suitable to their *calling*. He does not, therefore, impose upon any one the necessity of continuing in the kind of life which he has once taken up, but rather condemns that restlessness, which prevents an individual from remaining in his condition with a peaceable mind and he exhorts, that every one stick by his trade, as the old proverb goes.” (Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1, 248–49. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom39.xiv.v.html>>)

<sup>59</sup> Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 170.

<sup>60</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 304.

<sup>61</sup> Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1, 250. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom39.xiv.v.html>>

<sup>62</sup> Hays, *First Corinthians*, 124.

<sup>63</sup> Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 353.

when brought to its fullest expression, undercuts the very foundations of the practice of slavery altogether. If every Christian belongs to the Lord, how can any Christian own a fellow believer as a slave? Finally, Paul insists that because of the great price with which we were bought (i.e., the blood of Christ), we should avoid becoming the slaves of other people if at all possible (1 Cor. 7:23). The joy of God’s salvation is not found in our social condition, but in our being “with God” (1 Cor. 7:24). Regardless of the circumstances we find ourselves, God calls us to a relationship in Christ where we may be “perpetually mindful of his presence and favour” and “in communion with him.”<sup>64</sup> Whether married or unmarried, circumcised or uncircumcised, slave or free, there can be no greater joy than to live whatever circumstance we find ourselves in “with God.”

## Counsel to the Unmarried (1 Cor. 7:25–40)

As in 1 Corinthians 7:1, Paul again begins a new section in v. 25 with the phrase, “Now concerning...” By this phrase, Paul suggests that he is responding to a specific question or concern from the Corinthians themselves. Here, it seems that they have asked about whether or not the virgins in their midst should marry or not. The ESV translates the term *parthenos* as “betrothed,” and, indeed, these may refer to virgins who have entered into a contract toward marriage, but have not yet consummated the marriage (cf. Matt. 1:18). Furthermore, Paul is almost certainly speaking to betrothed individuals in v. 36–38 specifically. Nevertheless, the technical word for “betrothed” does not appear in this chapter, so we will use the more literal translation “virgin” in our study of this section.

### Paul’s Trustworthy Judgment (1 Cor. 7:25)

In contrast with 1 Corinthians 7:10, where Paul reminded married people about the command of the Lord Jesus, and in contrast with 1 Corinthians 7:12, where Paul issued his own command as an inspired apostle of the Lord Jesus, Paul here states that he has no command from the Lord.<sup>65</sup> Along with the rest of the Scriptures, this statement is inspired by the Holy Spirit; however, the Holy Spirit has inspired Paul “not to command, but to advise.”<sup>66</sup>

Thus, Paul gives his *gnōmē*: that is, his “opinion” (RSV, NASB, LEB) or, better, his “judgment” (KJV, NIV, ESV). Paul is not merely articulating his feelings on the subject, and neither is he merely adding his own opinion for the Corinthians to take or leave as they please. Rather, Paul is holding up the high responsibilities of marriage against the backdrop of the “present distress” and the shortened, appointed time in which they are living (1 Cor. 7:26, 29).<sup>67</sup> That is, Paul is asking them to evaluate

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<sup>64</sup> Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 125.

<sup>65</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 311.

<sup>66</sup> Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 126.

<sup>67</sup> “The word in this context basically means ‘advice,’ but the common translation ‘opinion’ does not adequately convey Paul’s meaning. That translation may connote that when he lacks a command from the Lord, he is uncertain of his ground and only feels his way by offering an ‘opinion.’ At the end of his discussion, however, he informs them that he has the Spirit (7:40). It becomes evident in 7:29 and 31 that this ‘opinion’ is based on his clear-sighted understanding of the end-time situation in which all now live.” (Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 321.)



the *opportunity* of marriage against what that *assignment* would entail, and in light of the *calling* to which they have been called. Notice here that Paul does not have a clear word from the Lord to answer their specific question. Instead, he puts in front of them all that God’s word teaches on two issues (the responsibilities of marriage and the shortness of the appointed time) and leaves it up to their own discretion to make a decision. Paul’s judgment, however, should not be taken lightly, since by God’s mercy Paul has been made “trustworthy.”

### Marriage During the Present Distress (1 Cor. 7:26–28)

Because this is not a pure command, Paul takes extra care to explain the reasons that he holds this judgment (1 Cor. 7:26).<sup>68</sup> Paul points to the “present distress”—that is, the “distress standing near, whether actually present, or impending,” depending on the context (cf. Luke 21:23; 2 Cor. 6:4; 1 Thess. 3:7).<sup>69</sup> Here, Paul is referring not to the distress that will come some day, leading up to the eventual return of Christ, but instead to the intense persecution that is coming now for those who have professed faith in Christ.<sup>70</sup> Does it really make sense to start a family when you may soon be fleeing for your life? Jesus himself warned about the increased difficulties that pregnant and nursing women would face during intense persecutions that were coming for his followers (Matt. 24:19).

Paul quickly clarifies that the “present distress” does not qualify as grounds for divorcing a wife that you already have (1 Cor. 7:27a). Indeed, the permanence of marriage is precisely what he is urging the Corinthians to take seriously! So, Paul encourages them not to seek a wife if they are not already bound to one (1 Cor. 7:27b). Nevertheless, this is only a matter of prudence, so if someone does marry, he or she does not in the least sin (1 Cor. 7:28a).<sup>71</sup> All Paul is saying is that someone who is considering marriage should take a sober-minded view of the worldly troubles they will encounter (1 Cor. 7:28b).

### The Shortness of the Appointed Time (1 Cor. 7:29–31)

Paul then gives a broader perspective for his reasoning: the appointed time has grown short (1

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<sup>68</sup> “‘I suppose’ in the A. V. is too weak; ‘I think’ in the R. V. is not strong enough. When one is rendering a judgment, *νομίζω* means: ‘I hold’ or ‘I consider.’” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 312.)

<sup>69</sup> Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 127.

<sup>70</sup> “By this ‘distress’ Paul refers to the painful and terrible experience which the confession of Christ may at any time bring upon a believer. Paul had many such experiences, and the Corinthians may well recall what the hostile Jews tried to do to Paul in the very city of Corinth. The days of the extensive pagan persecutions were drawing nigh. A girl that married and reared a family might thus be doubly and trebly overwhelmed, for her beloved husband might become involved, or she with him—and what about the children? History records many agonizing cases. Paul thus very properly writes that, in the face of the situation prevailing at that time, ‘a person’ may well prefer to remain alone, untrammled by tender family ties. No wife and no children needed to rend their hearts when Paul went on his journeys and often faced death itself.” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 313.)

<sup>71</sup> “Thus, this is no grudging condescension to marriage on Paul’s part, which by saying it is ‘no sin’ is equal to ‘damning it with faint praise.’ To the contrary, he recognizes that the question of marriage lies totally outside the category of sin, which is also why there is no ‘command’ of the Lord on this matter (cf. v. 25).” (Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 367–68.)

Cor. 7:29). In Greek, there are two different words for *time*: *chronos*, referring to a specific time (what you might identify by a watch or a calendar) or the duration of time (cf. 1 Cor. 7:39), and *kairos*, referring to time in the sense of a season, or an epoch, or an age. Here, the word is *kairos*, which means that Paul is not necessarily saying that there is very little *duration* of time left (in terms of days, weeks, months, and years), but only that the *season* in which we live has been compressed.<sup>72</sup> The *chronos* may include many years (and, indeed, more than two millennia has already passed), but the quality of the *kairos* is one where Christ’s return is always looming.<sup>73</sup>

For this reason, believers in Christ cannot live as though this world is ultimate and lasting. On the contrary, “the present form of this world is passing away” (1 Cor. 7:31b). For this reason, those who have wives should live as though they have none. This does not mean that we may ignore the responsibilities and obligations of marriage (cf. 1 Cor. 7:1–5), but only that we must see marriage as a means to lead our thoughts and affections toward heavenly things, rather than looking to marriage as an end in itself.<sup>74</sup> In the same way, those who mourn must acknowledge that their mourning is temporary until Christ returns (1 Cor. 7:30a). And, furthermore, even those who rejoice in the pleasures of this world must keep in mind that the joy of this world will fade away in the light of

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<sup>72</sup> “First he can announce a divine grace, viz., ‘the period has been shortened,’ καιρός, this ‘season’ or ‘period’ of the world age which precedes the final coming of Christ. Jesus himself says, ‘And except those days had been shortened, no flesh would have been saved; but for the elects’ sake those days shall be shortened,’ Matt. 24:22. The verb συστέλλω means “to draw together” and thus to shrink or to shorten. God graciously compressed the season that is marked by tribulation so that it may not become so extended that his saints cannot bear it.

Here we again meet the thesis that Paul was entirely certain that the Parousia would occur during his lifetime, and that the shortening of which he speaks implies a reduction to a few years at the longest. The fact is quite otherwise. Even as we now, so Paul at his time had to be ready for the Lord’s return at any time. We, therefore, see him reckoning with the imminence and with the delay of Christ’s return and speaking of it now in one, now in the other way. For the hour (period) and the day (date) were not revealed to him as they are not revealed to us. He knew what we also know, namely that the Lord’s return shall be unexpected, and no more.” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 317.)

<sup>73</sup> “Paul is not concerned about the duration of time (χρόνος, *chronos*; cf. 7:39) but the character of the time. He is talking not about how little time is left but about how Christ’s death and resurrection have changed how Christians should look at the time that is left. He is not recommending that one should take the short-term view of life, nor is he offering an interim ethic for the impending end-time tribulation. Instead, he understands the compressing of the time to mean that the future outcome of this world has become crystal clear.” (Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 328–29.)

<sup>74</sup> “Again he discourses respecting the holy use of marriage, for the purpose of repressing the wantonness of those who, when they have married, think of nothing but the delights of the flesh. They have no remembrance of God. Hence he exhorts believers not to give way to unbridled desire in such a way, that marriage should have the effect of plunging them into the world. Marriage is a remedy for incontinency. It has really the effect, if it be used with moderation. He therefore exhorts married persons to live together chastely in the fear of the Lord. This will be effected, if marriage is made use of by them, like other helps of this earthly life, having their hearts directed upwards to meditation on the heavenly life.” (Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1, 256–57. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom39.xiv.vii.html>>)

eternity (1 Cor. 7:30b). Those who buy must not live for consumption, but rather must recognize that everything in this world spoils, corrupts, and fades away—that is, they must not be “engrossed” or “absorbed” in what they use (1 Cor. 7:30c).<sup>75</sup> Finally, those who engage in business in this world must see their worldly affairs as nothing in light of the eternal commerce of heaven.

In sum, we must see that the *schēma*—the outward form—of this world is passing away as this *kairos* stands ready to give way to the eternal *kairos* when Christ returns (1 Cor. 7:31b). The Apostle John says something almost identical, except that he adds a positive application: “And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever” (1 John 2:17). If this world is passing away, then we must evaluate every opportunity (including marriage) in light of looming eternity.

### Freedom from Anxieties (1 Cor. 7:32–35)

In light of this looming eternity, Paul explains that he desires that believers should be free (as far as possible) from the cares and anxieties (*amerimnos*) of this passing-away form of the world (1 Cor. 7:32).<sup>76</sup> The best illustration of the anxiety Paul is warning against here came in the story of Mary and Martha, where Jesus used the same word to rebuke Martha: “Martha, Martha, you are *anxious* [*merimnas*] and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her” (Luke 10:41–42).<sup>77</sup> While Martha busied herself with the duties of hosting, she was “distracted” (Luke 10:40) from giving her full attention to Jesus. Thus, her mind was “divided” (1 Cor. 7:34a) between her guests and her Lord.

There can be no disputing the fact that unmarried men and women have liberty to devote themselves entirely to the cares and anxieties of serving and pleasing the Lord. It is in this sense of holiness as entire devotion and consecration to the Lord and the Lord’s service (and not a moral or ethical sense) that Paul speaks about the unmarried as being “holy in body and spirit” (1 Cor. 7:34b).<sup>78</sup> Like Mary, unmarried people may choose the “good portion” (Luke 10:42) without any competing obligations. Now, this does not mean that to remain single is by definition a holier state of being, since Paul has already warned that some who are unmarried *should* get married, for, as John Calvin writes, “Where there is burning [with illicit sexual desire], (1 Corinthians 7:9,) no love of God can exist.”<sup>79</sup> Furthermore, Paul clearly has no intention of undercutting the validity and goodness of marriage, an ordinance God established in the innocence of original creation.<sup>80</sup> Paul simply wants those who *do* marry to enter into the marriage vows with a clear understanding of the anxieties they are taking upon themselves concerning their spouses and any children that may arise from the marriage relationship. Thus, Paul commends singleness, but leaves every person with the

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<sup>75</sup> Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 377.

<sup>76</sup> Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 378.

<sup>77</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 322.

<sup>78</sup> Morris, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 117–18.

<sup>79</sup> Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1, 260. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom39.xiv.vii.html>>

<sup>80</sup> Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 131.

liberty of choosing whether or not to marry.<sup>81</sup>

In the same way, there can be no disputing the fact that married men and women must divide their attention between the things of the Lord and their families. Indeed, this kind of devotion between husbands and wives is not only required by marriage, but carries with it the honor of projecting to the world a fitting image of the devotion of Christ to his church, and the devotion of the church to Christ (Eph. 5:22–33). So, when Paul speaks of how a married person is “anxious” about his family, we should not read into that word a purely negative meaning. Gordon Fee even suggests that the translation “care for” might better bring out the positive nature of how married people should care for both the Lord and for their spouses.<sup>82</sup> The divided mind of married people is not sin, even if the undivided mind of unmarried people in their devotion to the Lord carries an advantage. Yet again, whoever seeks to remain single while yet burning with sexual desire has not attained this advantage, but has foolishly forfeited God’s good provision in attempting to seek ungodly, Stoic singleness. This foolish pursuit is an attempt toward holiness of *body* apart from holiness of *spirit* (cf. 1 Cor. 7:34).<sup>83</sup>

All this Paul says for the benefit of believers, and not to bind them in a “snare” by restricting the liberty God has given them to choose wisely in this area (1 Cor. 7:35).<sup>84</sup> We should keep in mind that Paul is counseling *specific* believers in a *specific* situation (“in view of the present distress”; 1 Cor. 7:26) toward singleness, whereas elsewhere, to *different* believers in a *different* situation, Paul instead

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<sup>81</sup> “He returns to the advice which he had spoken of, (1 Corinthians 7:25,) but had not as yet fully explained, and in the outset he pronounces, as he is wont, a commendation upon celibacy, and then afterwards allows every one the liberty of choosing what he may consider to suit him best. It is not, however, without good reason that he returns so frequently to proclaim the advantages of celibacy, for he saw that the burdens of matrimony were far from light. The man who can exempt himself from them, ought not to refuse such a benefit, and it is of advantage for those who resolve to marry, to be forewarned of those inconveniences, that they may not afterwards, on meeting with them unexpectedly, give way to despondency. This we see happens to many, for having promised themselves unmixed honey, on being disappointed in that expectation, they are very readily cast down by the slightest mishap. Let them know, therefore, in good time, what they have to expect, that they may be prepared to endure everything patiently. The meaning is this: ‘Marriage brings along with it hindrances, from which I should wish you to be free and exempt.’” (Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1, 258–59. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom39.xiv.vii.html>>)

<sup>82</sup> Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 380.

<sup>83</sup> “We may, however, infer from this statement of Paul, that no chastity is well pleasing to God that does not extend to the *soul* as well as to the *body*. Would to God that those who prate in such haughty terms as to continency, did but understand that they have to do with God! They would not be so confident in their contendings with us. At the same time, there are none in the present day who dispute on the subject of continency in more magnificent style than those who are openly and in the most shameless manner guilty of fornication. But though they should conduct themselves ever so honorably in the sight of men, that is nothing, if they do not keep their minds pure and exempt from all uncleanness.” (Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1, 262–63. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom39.xiv.vii.html>>)

<sup>84</sup> Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 131.

counsels widows to marry and bear children (1 Tim. 5:14).<sup>85</sup> Paul’s words in this context are written first toward what is honorable, or “to promote good order.” Literally, this word means “toward the good *schēmon*,” which is closely related to the word that Paul used at the end of the last paragraph: “For the present *schēma* of the world is passing away” (1 Cor. 7:31). The *schēma* of something is the outward, changeable fashion of something, rather than its internal, enduring essence.<sup>86</sup> In this case, the “good *schēmon*” for the Corinthians was to consider singleness strongly, even though marriage is not sin (1 Cor. 7:28, 36), while in another case the “good *schēmon*” may be to prioritize marriage, even though singleness is not sin (e.g., 1 Tim. 5:14).

Second, Paul explains that God is ultimately seeking our “devotion to the Lord without distraction [*aperistpastōs*].”<sup>87</sup> We must avoid falling into the same temptation of Martha, who was also “distracted” (*periespato*; Luke 10:40) from the Lord by the care (*merimnas*) she was taking to serve her hosts (Luke 10:41–42).<sup>88</sup> If we are married, we *must* fulfill our marital obligations to our spouses (1 Cor. 7:1–5); however, we must also live as those who have no wives (1 Cor. 7:29b). Whether we are married or not, we cannot live as though our lives in this world were ultimate. Rather, regardless of our assignments, we are called to love and serve the Lord in our various assignments in light of looming eternity.

### Fathers or Engaged People? (1 Cor. 7:36–38)

Because Paul does not clearly name his intended recipients in 1 Corinthians 7:36–38, two major interpretations have emerged to explain his words here. In one interpretation found in the ASV, Amplified Bible, and the NASB, the question Paul is addressing is whether a *father* should allow his *virgin daughter* to marry. In the other interpretation, found in most translations (including the ESV), Paul is addressing whether a *betrothed man* should consummate the marriage with his *betrothed virgin*. The strength of the first argument is in the change in verbs from *gameō* (“to marry”) to *gamizō* (“to give in marriage”) in v. 38, which may be translated “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” (1 Cor. 7:38 NASB).<sup>89</sup> Nevertheless, this is probably not the correct interpretation of this passage.

To begin, in the Koine Greek (“common” Greek) in which Paul was writing, the distinctions between *gameō* and *gamizō* had largely broken down, so that the two terms had become interchangeable. Thus, it would be tenuous to base an interpretation of this passage on a meaning that the word may not even carry. Furthermore, as Fee observes, all uses of *gameō* in this chapter are intransitive, without a direct object (e.g., “But if you do *marry*, you have not sinned...” 1 Cor. 7:28), and this is the only transitive use of the verb “to marry [someone],” with a direct object (“So then he

<sup>85</sup> Schreiner, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 159.

<sup>86</sup> The usage of the word εὐσχημον (*euschēmon*) often has to do with a good outward reputation, used frequently to describe those of “high standing” in society or the church (Mark 15:43; Acts 13:50; 17:12; 1 Cor. 12:24).

<sup>87</sup> Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 132.

<sup>88</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 325.

<sup>89</sup> The NASB italicizes words (in this case, *daughter*) to reflect the fact that a word does not appear in the original text, but is added to help understand the meaning, according to the interpretation taken by the NASB.

who *marries his betrothed* does well...”), which may explain the different uses of the verb.<sup>90</sup> Additionally, there is no other hint in 1 Corinthians 7 that Paul has in mind whether fathers should give their daughters in marriage, and this interpretation would force a different meaning of *who* does not sin in v. 28 and v. 36: first, the virgin, and second, her father.<sup>91</sup> Beyond these reasons, there are several other exegetical reasons to reject the father-daughter interpretation and to understand that Paul is speaking not to fathers in relation to their daughters, but to engaged persons in relation to their betrothed.<sup>92</sup>

### Whether Engaged People Should Marry (1 Cor. 7:36–38)

Assuming that Paul is speaking to engaged people, what does he actually tell them? First, Paul asks the engaged man to make a *judgment*, using the same word for “think” (*nomizō*) that Paul used earlier in v. 26: “I think that...” The point is that Paul is not giving a strict command, but is asking engaged people to evaluate their circumstances. Second, Paul specifically asks the man to evaluate whether he is “unseemly” toward his virgin. The word for “unseemly” is *aschēmoneō*, closely related to “the present *form* (*schēma*) of this world is passing away” (1 Cor. 7:31b) and Paul’s encouragement toward singleness as “the good *schēmon*” (1 Cor. 7:35) in the current situation. Later, Paul will use this word to describe “rude” behavior which is the opposite of love (1 Cor. 13:5). What, then, is “unseemly” here? The ESV translation (“not behaving properly”) perhaps suggests unseemly *behavior*; however, we should remember that this man’s fiancée is still described as a “virgin,” which suggests that this idea does not include *physical* sexual immorality.

It seems best, then, to understand the unseemliness of the situation as having to do with strong sexual passions: “if his passions are strong” (1 Cor. 7:36). While some translations take this phrase as referring to getting beyond the *age* of one’s prime for marriage (KJV, LEB), this phrase more likely has to do with sexual passion specifically, of which age plays a role. This interpretation is strengthened by the criterion Paul gives in the next verse for whether someone may properly refrain from marriage: “having his *desire* under control” (1 Cor. 7:37). Elsewhere, this word for *desire* (*thelēma*) is used explicitly to refer to sexual desire that leads to the begetting of children (“will of the

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<sup>90</sup> “The verb *gamizō*, however, is not found outside the NT; in classical Greek *gameō* served both purposes. To the question whether the verb *must* carry the nuance ‘to give in marriage,’ the answer is No. There is sufficient evidence that the classical distinctions between *-eō* and *-izō* verbs had broken down in the *koinē* period. But that still does not answer the question as to *why* Paul changed verbs in this set of sentences. The usual answer is ‘for the sake of variety,’ which may still be the best one. It is at least noteworthy that this is the only case in the chapter where the verb ‘to marry’ has an object. All uses of *gameō* are intransitive; it may be that for Paul *gamizō* carried a transitive nuance, hence its usage here.” (Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 390–91.)

<sup>91</sup> “Nothing in 7:25–35 prepares for this reading of the situation. Since no previous mention of parental duties or relationships appears in this chapter, its emergence here seems rather jarring. If Paul describes a father’s decision to give his daughter in marriage, he uses quite extraordinary language (‘under no compulsion,’ ‘having authority over his own will’ = ‘possessing sufficient will-power,’ ‘he does not sin’). This interpretation also fails to explain adequately why Paul would say in 7:28 ‘If the virgin marries, she does not sin,’ assuming that “the virgin” here is no different from ‘the virgin’ referred to in 7:36–38.” (Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 337.)

<sup>92</sup> For a good summary, see Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 182–85.

flesh/man”; John 1:13).<sup>93</sup> Thus, Paul is reiterating his advice from earlier: “But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion” (1 Cor. 7:9).

So, if one’s passionate strong, which brings about an urgency and necessity for marriage in order to guard one’s purity (“if it has to be”), then Paul advises the engaged couple to marry, reassuring them that to marry is not sin (1 Cor. 7:36). On the other hand, for whoever “stands in his heart steadfast, not having necessity, but has authority concerning his own desire, and this he has judged in his own heart, to keep her a virgin, he will do well” (1 Cor. 7:37, my translation). As important as it may be for those without the gift of continency to marry, those *with* the gift of continency will do well to refrain from marrying. The word “steadfast” (*hedraios*; ESV: “firmly established”) is the root word for “devotion” (*euparedron*) earlier in v. 35.<sup>94</sup>

Furthermore, where the ESV speaks of having one’s desire “under control” is literally “has authority (*exousian*),” which appeared earlier in this chapter regarding the authority that the husband has over his wife’s body, and that the wife has over her husband’s body (1 Cor. 7:4). This word for “authority” also appeared earlier to state that all things were lawful, but not all things helpful for me (1 Cor. 6:12). Finally, when Paul says that refraining from marriage is *better* (*kreissōn*) than marrying (1 Cor. 7:38), he uses an alternate form of the word he used earlier to say that marrying is *better* (*kreittōn*) than burning with passion (1 Cor. 7:9). In this whole passage, Paul is not rambling from thought to thought in a disorganized manner. Rather, he is writing a tight, carefully woven treatise that continues to reuse the same words in new ways in order to give a coherent teaching on marriage in light of the looming eternity. To marry is better than to burn, but to refrain from marriage (if given the gift of continency) is better than marrying.

### Married for Life, Married in the Lord (1 Cor. 7:39–40)

Finally, Paul states that a wife is bound to her husband for the duration of his life, but that she is free to remarry if her husband dies—but only in the Lord (1 Cor. 7:39). Paul used the word “bound” earlier in v. 27 to describe the binding nature of the marriage relationship. Also, Paul states in Romans 7:2 the same principle that a wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives. Interestingly, the word translated as “as long as” is the *other* word for time: *chronos*. Earlier, Paul had spoken of the shortened, looming *time* (*kairos*; “season”) of eternity (1 Cor. 7:29), but now Paul talks about the length and duration of the *time* of a husband’s life. After that duration of time of her husband’s life is over, a wife may marry again, but only in light of looming eternity: “in the Lord.” Specifically, this means that she must avoid being unequally yoked by marrying only a fellow believer (cf. 2 Cor. 6:14–15).<sup>95</sup> This verse is an important protection for the liberty of widows to remarry without being

<sup>93</sup> Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 342.

<sup>94</sup> Regarding *euparedron* in v. 35: “The adjective *εὐπάρεδρος* is interesting: *εὐ* == well; *παρά* == beside; *ἔδρα* (*ἔζομαι*) == seat or sitting; sitting well beside a task, faithful attendance upon a person or a thing, devotion to. Paul’s chief purpose is to promote among the Corinthians the fullest devotion to the Lord on the part of each individual, and this explains what Paul means by cares for the things of the Lord, how to please him.” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 325.)

<sup>95</sup> “There are two ways in which this restriction [*only in the Lord*] may be understood. First, that she should marry only one who is in the Lord, i.e. a Christian. Though mixed marriages between Christians and Jews or Gentiles should not, when formed, be broken up (as taught above, vs. 12–15); yet no such marriage ought to

“branded with the reproach of intemperance.”<sup>96</sup>

Yet, Paul once more offers his “judgment” (*gnōmē*; cf. 1 Cor. 7:25). Specifically, he offers his judgment that a widow would be happier to *abide/remain/endure* (cf. 1 Cor. 7:8, 11, 20, 24) as she is. This is not a command, but a judgment—and, specifically, the judgment of one who has the Spirit of God. That is, this is *inspired* advice that comes to us not as a rule, but as a perfect illustration of how we ought to evaluate the choices available to us by our Christian liberty.<sup>97</sup> As Paul demonstrates, the decision of whether to marry (or, to remarry) must ultimately be made in the light of eternity. For those who would fall into sin and distraction by burning in their passions, Paul urges them to marry. Marrying is not sin (1 Cor. 7:28, 36)! But for those like him who have received from God’s Spirit the gift of continency, Paul encourages them to remain single. They will avoid worldly troubles (1 Cor. 7:28), live free from worldly anxieties (1 Cor. 7:32), and be happier (1 Cor. 7:40).

## Discussion Questions

- 1) In how many ways does Paul strongly urge married couples to practice sexual intimacy (1 Cor. 7:1–5)? What do these reasons tell us about Paul’s view of sexual intimacy in marriage? What does Paul mean by “self-control” and “burning” (1 Cor. 7:5, 9)? What is the “gift of continency”? In your life, how should you deal with your desires?
- 2) What are the only biblical grounds for divorce (Matt. 19:1–9; 1 Cor. 7:8–16; WCF 24.6)? In what ways does the new covenant offer stronger promises to the children and unbelieving spouses of believers (1 Cor. 7:14)? What would you say to someone considering divorce for any reason other than sexual immorality or willful abandonment?
- 3) What is the difference between God’s effectual “calling” and the various “assignments” we have (1 Cor. 7:17–24)? What kind of providentially available “opportunities” may present themselves to change our assignments (1 Cor. 7:21)? What might lead us to reject such opportunities? What might lead us to embrace such opportunities without sin?
- 4) What factors might lead us to refrain from marriage, or to pursue marriage (1 Cor. 7:25–40)? In

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be contracted. Or, secondly, the phrase may be taken adverbially as expressing manner, *as becomes those who are in the Lord*, i.e. in a Christian manner. She is to marry as becomes a Christian. This interpretation includes the other. Compare Rom. 16, 2. 22. Eph 6, 1, &c. The former explanation is the more simple and natural.” (Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 134.)

<sup>96</sup> Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1, 269–70. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom39.xiv.ix.html>>

<sup>97</sup> “The meaning here clearly is, that the apostle was led by the Spirit to give the advice in question; so that his advice is, so to speak, the advice of the Spirit. But is not the advice of the Spirit obligatory? Certainly, if he meant it to be so; but if he meant simply to lay down a general rule of expediency, and to leave every one to judge of its application to his or her peculiar case, then it leaves all concerned free. It would cease to be advice if men could not act contrary to it, without irreverence or disobedience.” (Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 134.)



what sense has the “appointed time...grown very short” (1 Cor. 7:29)? How is the “present form of this world...passing away” (1 Cor. 7:31)? What might be required of you to live devoted to the Lord without distraction (1 Cor. 7:35)?