

1 Corinthians – Lesson 9

7 Now concerning (Περί δέ) the things of which you wrote (γράφω) to me: It is good (καλός) for a man (ἄνθρωπος) not to touch (ἅπτω) a woman (γυνή). 2 Nevertheless, because of sexual immorality (πορνεία), let each man have his own wife (γυνή), and let each woman have her own husband (ἄνθρωπος). 3 Let the husband (ἄνθρωπος) render (ὀφείλω) to his wife (γυνή) the affection (εὐνοία) due her, and likewise also the wife (γυνή) to her husband (ἄνθρωπος). 4 The wife (γυνή) does not have authority (ἐξουσιάζω) over her own body (σῶμα), but the husband (ἄνθρωπος) does. And likewise the husband (ἄνθρωπος) does not have authority (ἐξουσιάζω) over his own body (σῶμα), but the wife (γυνή) does. 5 Do not deprive (ἀποστερέω) one another except with consent (σύμφωνος) for a time (καιρός), that you may give yourselves to fasting (νηστεία) and prayer (προσευχή); and come together (συνέρχομαι) again so that Satan does not tempt (πειράζω) you because of your lack of self-control (ἀκρασία). 6 But I say this as a concession (συγγνώμη), not as a commandment. 7 For (γάρ) I wish (θέλω) that all men (ἄνθρωπος) were even as I myself. But each one has his own gift (χάρισμα) from God, one in this manner and another in that. 8 But (δέ) I say to the unmarried (αγαμος) and to the widows (χήρα): It is good (καλός) for them if they remain even as I am; 9 but if they cannot exercise self-control (ἐγκρατεύομαι), let them marry (γαμέω). For (γάρ) it is better to marry (γαμέω) than to burn (πυρόω) with passion.

7:1 – After six meaty chapters, Paul finally gets around to answering their letter. We know this by the introduction of this chapter with the phrase **Περί δέ (“Now concerning”)** – a phrase Paul will use five more times in this epistle (verse 25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1 and 12) to answer specific items the Corinthians have asked about in their letter. Paul uses the rest of this letter to address the matters they have written him about. In 5:9, we learned that Paul had previously written a letter to the Corinthians dealing with sexual immorality. Did they really not understand that sin or are they being sarcastic? The Greek reads almost literally: **It is good for a man not to touch a woman**. There seem to be four possible ways to view this phrase. First, it is a slogan of some Corinthian Christians in response to the slogans found in 1 Corinthians 6:12-13. Secondly, the Corinthians are asking this as a question – **“Is it good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman?”** Thirdly, the Corinthians could be taking Paul’s previous advice on sexual immorality to an extreme and concluding that it is better for Christians to abstain from sexual relations. Finally, the Corinthians may have believed that they had reached a level of spirituality comparable to angels in which sexual relations should be avoided even in marriage. (See Matthew 22:30.) This last idea became prevalent after Gordon Fee postulated in his commentary that this statement may be the first evidence for so-called “eschatological women” – women who thought of themselves as having already realized the “resurrection from the dead” by being in spirit and already existing as angels.¹ While there may be some validity to this concept of spirituality, the eschatological umbrella would have to be widened to include men since Paul puts their sexual desires on an equal footing in verses 2-5.

7:2 – This verse literally begins with “But because of the sexual immoralities.” (Paul will use similar reasoning to avoid sexual immorality in 1 Thessalonians 4:3-7.) This states

¹ Fee, G. D. (1987). The First Epistle to the Corinthians (p. 269). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

the reason for what Paul is going to say about marriage in the second part of this verse as well as verses 3-4. In this verse, Paul uses a present active imperative indicating a continuing action – a monogamous relationship based on sexual equality. The beauty of Paul's answer is found in the issues he has already addressed in chapters 5 and 6. Having a wife or husband is not a command to marry but rather the command for proper sexual relationships – within the bonds of matrimony. This was first brought out by Paul in disbelief that **“a man has his father's wife”** (5:1). **“Let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband”** also introduces the concept of equality in marriage which is often repeated in this passage.

7:3 – Paul is dealing with a very delicate subject for those of us in the 21st century but probably not so much in pagan Corinth. The language Paul uses in Greek (ὀφείλω – *oh-fay'-low*) is the language of debt or obligation, literally, “the payment of what is due.” Again, the verbs are present imperatives indicating a continuing command or obligation. Notice the equality – husband to wife and wife to husband. This stresses the unity in marriage. Just as verse 3 expands on verse 2, verse 4 does the same on verse 3. Husbands and wives are to be considerate of one another's sexual needs. Duane Warden comments that Paul “was not suggesting that one's body must be offered to a partner as a mere matter of duty. He was affirming that sexual fulfillment between a man and a woman is blessed by God within the marriage relationship.”²

7:4 – This verse leaves little doubt that Paul is referring to sexual relations in marriage. The Greek verb for **“have authority”** (ἐξουσιάζω – *ex-oo-see-ahd'-zo*) used twice in this verse was used by Paul in 6:12. Paul is addressing sexual relations in marriage – and equality is the rule regardless of how society views these relationships. **Εξουσιάζω** literally means “has rights over”; that is, “has exclusive claim to,” which has already been shown in the teaching of *1 Corinthians 6:16*, **“the two will become one flesh.”**³ Within marriage, “there is no place for either spouse to claim prerogatives of personal preferences or rights” in sexual intimacy.⁴ One's sexual freedom is restricted to and by their spouse. Looking back at verses 2-4, we can see a beautiful example of Hebrew poetry in its form. The three verses say the same thing, but each expands on the previous verse. Let each have a mate – let each pay their sexual obligation to their mate – your mate exercises authority over your body.

7:5 – The present tense imperative that begins this verse might be translated “Stop depriving (or ‘defrauding’) one another!” This would indicate something they were presently doing and helps explain the prostitute business in chapter 6. It also helps back up the claims of those who attribute the problem to men and women who thought they had arrived spiritually at the level of angels. The Greek word for defraud (ἀποστερέω – *ah-post-eh-reh'-oh*) is the same word used in 6:7-8. Paul now gives three conditions for stopping normal sexual relations in marriage: it must be by mutual consent; it must be for a set time; and it must be for the specific purpose of prayer. (The inclusion of fasting in the KJV and the NKJV seems to be a later addition to the text and does not appear in the major manuscripts.⁵) Once the preset time has passed, the couple is to resume normal

² Warden, D. (2016). *1 Corinthians. Truth for Today Commentary* (1 Co 7:3). Searcy, AR: Resource Publications.

³ Mare, W. H. (1976). *1 Corinthians*. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Romans through Galatians* (Vol. 10, p. 228). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

⁴ Oster, R. (1995). *1 Corinthians* (1 Co 7:4). Joplin, MO: College Press Pub. Co.

⁵ Winters, H. (1987). *Commentary on First Corinthians* (1 Co 7:5). Greenville, SC: Carolina Christian.

sexual relations to avoid Satan's temptation due to their lack of self-control. Yielding to Satan's temptation would lead to the sexual immoralities with which this section began in verse 2.

7:6 – This verse has caused many problems because of the disagreement over the pronoun “this” and what it refers to. It is in the emphatic position – the first word in the verse – and Paul states that what he has said is a concession (**συγγνώμη** – *soong-guh-no'-may*). This is the only time this word appears in the New Testament but, in the LXX, it carries the sense of being indulgent to someone. It is not a command to cease sexual relations for prayer but a concession to the Corinthians who are abstaining from sex in marriage. Paul is an inspired apostle and is not giving a command to cease sexual relations in marriage – even for prayer. Perhaps these comments from Duane Warden are helpful: Abstinence from a sexual relationship with a marriage partner was not a sign of holiness, nor would it cause God to be more favorably inclined to one's praise or petitions. The choice of marriage partners to abstain from sexual relations for a time by mutual consent was strictly a private matter. Paul approved of the practice “by way of concession, not of command.”⁶

7:7 – By having verse 6 referring back to verse 5, Paul's words in this verse now take on a little different meaning. Paul concludes his advice on the general principle of marriage with a desire that all men could be like him and live a celibate life. However, Paul acknowledges that it (the celibate life) is a gracious gift (**χάρισμα** – *khar'-eese-mah*) from God. And, like other spiritual gifts, only certain people possess it. This leaves no doubt that Paul was not married when he wrote this letter. But it has been suggested that he was previously married like any good Jewish man. In fact, it was a requirement if he was ever a member of the Sanhedrin as some interpret *Acts 26:10-12*.⁷

7:8-9 – Before attempting to understand the meaning of this verse (*1 Corinthians 7:8*), it is helpful to view it in the context of what follows. Verses 8, 10 and 12 have a connective word (**δέ**) near the beginning of the verse, a verb of speaking or commanding in the first person singular (referring to Paul) and the people being addressed in the dative. This would indicate that the apostle Paul is addressing three different sets of people in these three verses (8, 10 and 12) in addition to those he addressed in verses 2-6 – the married.⁸ If this observation is correct, then Paul is addressing a second group of people in verse 8 and we must identify them. Who are the unmarried? Is it not redundant to say, “**unmarried and widows**”? A better way to look at this verse, in my opinion, is that Paul is addressing “**widowers and widows**”. First of all, the Greek word for widower (**ἄγαμος** – *ahg'-ah-mose*) was not used during the koine period.⁹ This is really not unusual since most cultures view women in a widowed status as having special problems. It is apparent even in the English language where most feminine forms of words come from the masculine form – waiter/waitress and host/hostess; but the Greek word for widower comes from the feminine form – “widow”. Secondly, it would seem logical for Paul to

⁶ Warden, D. (2016). *1 Corinthians. Truth for Today Commentary* (1 Co 7:6). Searcy, AR: Resource Publications.

⁷ Morris, L. (1985). *1 Corinthians: an introduction and commentary* (Vol. 7, p. 107). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

⁸ Fee, G. D. (2014). *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*. (N. B. Stonehouse, F. F. Bruce, G. D. Fee, & J. B. Green, Eds.) (Revised Edition, p. 318). Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

⁹ Ellingworth, P., Hatton, H., & Ellingworth, P. (1995). *A handbook on Paul's first letter to the Corinthians* (p. 149). New York: United Bible Societies.

equally address men and women here as he does throughout this passage – twelve times in all. This approach also groups verses 1-16 into those presently or formerly married while verses 25-38 deal with those who have never been married. Some people have thought that Paul himself was a widower; if so, this would make the end of this verse even more meaningful. It could mean “**it is good for them to remain unmarried as I do myself.**”¹⁰ However, if the widowers and widows cannot practice self-control, they should remarry. Paul introduces the reason with an explanatory γάρ (“for”) in the second part of verse 9: **It is better to marry than to burn** (probably “with passion” but it could mean “in eternal punishment”).¹¹ This again addresses the issue of sexual immoralities in verse 2. We should also note that this doesn’t negate Paul’s advice in *1 Timothy 5:14* for the younger widows to marry. The advice here in *1 Corinthians 7* must be viewed with regard to the situation mentioned in verse 26 although we don’t know the specifics.

10 Now (δέ) to the married (γαμέω) I command (παραγγέλλω), yet not I but the Lord: A wife (γυνή) is not to depart (χωρίζω) from her husband (άνήρ). 11 But (δέ) even if she does depart (χωρίζω), let her remain unmarried (αγαμος) or be reconciled to her husband (άνήρ). And a husband (άνήρ) is not to divorce (αφίημι) his wife (γυνή).

12 But (δέ) to the rest I, not the Lord (κύριος), say: If any brother (άδελφός) has a wife (γυνή) who does not believe (άπιστος), and she is willing to live with him, let him not divorce (αφίημι) her. 13 And a woman (γυνή) who has a husband (άνήρ) who does not believe (άπιστος), if he is willing to live with her, let her not divorce (αφίημι) him. 14 For the unbelieving (άπιστος) husband (άνήρ) is sanctified (άγιάζω) by the wife (γυνή), and the unbelieving (άπιστος) wife (γυνή) is sanctified (άγιάζω) by the husband (άνήρ); otherwise your children (τέκνον) would be unclean, but now they are holy (αγιος). 15 But if the unbeliever (άπιστος) departs (χωρίζω), let him depart (χωρίζω); a brother (άδελφός) or a sister (άδελφή) is not under bondage (δουλόω) in such cases. But God has called us to peace (είρήνη). 16 For (γάρ) how do you know (οιδα), O wife (γυνή), whether you will save (σώζω) your husband (άνήρ)? Or how do you know (οιδα), O husband (άνήρ), whether you will save (σώζω) your wife (γυνή)?

7:10-11 – In verses 2-6, Paul addressed the married couples who were giving up sexual relations; now he is addressing those married couples who were giving up marriage. While women leaving their husbands was rare at this time, the way Paul words verses 10-11 seems to point to ladies as well as men thinking they had reached a level of spiritual maturity that dictated no necessity for remaining married. This is one of the rare occasions where Paul appeals to the teachings of Jesus for what he writes (cf. *9:14*; *11:23*; and *1 Timothy 5:18*). This is in contrast to his words in verse 12 where he speaks – not the Lord. But here he appeals to the teaching of Jesus – *Mark 10:11-12*. Paul gave the instructions in verse 10 not to separate but verse 11 gives instructions in case they have – they must remain single or be reconciled to their mate. Remarriage is not addressed in this passage. It is interesting that this Greek word **αφίημι (ah-fee-ay-mee)**

¹⁰ Ellingworth, P., Hatton, H., & Ellingworth, P. (1995). *A handbook on Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians* (p. 149). New York: United Bible Societies.

¹¹ Morris, L. (1985). *1 Corinthians: an introduction and commentary* (Vol. 7, p. 108). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

is used 146 times in the New Testament but is only translated “divorce” these three times in verses 11-13 (in the NKJV). Otherwise, it carries the idea of letting go or leaving or forgiving.

7:12-13 – In verses 10-11, Paul had been able to cite a specific teaching of Jesus. Now, by inspiration, the apostle must speak to the situation since Jesus had not addressed it. (A woman was permitted to divorce her husband under Greek and Roman law – but not under Jewish law.) The remaining group which Paul now addresses is a Christian married to a non-believer (pagan). As Paul has urged the preceding groups, he urges this group – “Stay as you are!” The Christian man – a brother – married to a pagan wife who is willing to live with him (perhaps after his conversion), is to remain with her. Similarly, the Christian woman married to an unbeliever is to remain with him if he is willing. Paul is giving a command to the Christian spouse in both verses.

7:14 – Paul now introduces the reason for his commands to the Christians in verses 12-13 – to remain with their unbelieving or pagan spouses – with an explanatory γάρ (“for”): the unbeliever is made holy or sanctified by the believing or Christian spouse. And, now, we must determine what that means but we must not read too much into the text. What does sanctification mean? Look at its use in a passage we’ve already examined – 6:9-11. Sanctification is the equivalent of salvation in this passage. Literally, the word means “set apart for service to God”. But, in verse 14, we know that the unbeliever is not saved by the believing spouse. Perhaps we can get a clue to the meaning from the Old Testament – *Exodus 30:25-29*. Paul had written a previous letter to the Corinthians which they had misinterpreted to mean that Christians were to have no contact with immoral people. Paul told them in 5:10 that, if this were true, they would have to leave this world. What Paul meant was that such people were not to be part of the church – they couldn’t be Christians and continue practicing the sins prevalent in Corinth. Sharing the marriage bed is the closest association a Christian can have with an unbeliever. If some of the Corinthian Christians were willing to stop sexual relations and even divorce their Christian partners, think of how those married to unbelievers might react. But, just as the things which touch the sanctified parts of the tabernacle were made holy (see also *Exodus 29:37*), the same applies in marriage. The unbelieving spouse is sanctified by the believing spouse. The believing spouse is not defiled by the unbeliever – instead the reverse is true. The potential for the spouse’s salvation is possible as long as the marriage is maintained. Richard Oster draws the following conclusion: Most interpreters regard the benefits received by the unbelieving spouse and children to be the sanctifying influence of the godly spouse, leading ultimately to their future salvation. This interpretation is strengthened by the fact of Paul’s later use of the idea of salvation in this regard (7:16; cf. 1 Pet 3:1–6).¹² As he pointed out, this sanctification extends to the children. Can you think of a good first century example of such a child? (*Acts 16:1*; 2 *Timothy 1:5* and 2 *Timothy 3:15*) In other words, their marriage is legitimate in the eyes of God and so are their children. Howard Winters sums up Paul’s meaning in this verse: “His point is that the marriage is not made impure just because one or the other is an unbeliever. Rather the opposite is true: God recognizes the marriage as pure. Thus it is sanctified and cannot be broken by the believer.”¹³

¹² Oster, R. (1995). 1 Corinthians (1 Co 7:14). Joplin, MO: College Press Pub. Co.

¹³ Winters, H. (1987). Commentary on First Corinthians (1 Co 7:14). Greenville, SC: Carolina Christian.

7:15 – For Christians, Paul admonishes them to “Stay as you are!” But the pagan may decide to leave the marriage. And, if this happens, the believer is not enslaved (**δουλόω** – *doo-lo'-o*) to the marriage contract. Howard Winters begins to explain with these words in his commentary: This does not refer to the bondage of marriage per se but the bondage or obligation to maintain the marriage, as imposed in vv. 10-14.¹⁴ This statement of “**not under bondage**” in the KJV/NKJV/NASB (“**not enslaved**” in the ESV) has often been called the Pauline privilege and then cited as permission for remarriage. However, Paul is not discussing remarriage.¹⁵ Paul always uses this word **δουλόω** (“**enslaved**”) in a figurative sense: *Romans 6:18, 22; 1 Corinthians 9:19; Galatians 4:3; Titus 2:3* and *2 Peter 2:19*¹⁶. But Paul uses another Greek word – **δέω** – for being legally bound in marriage (*1 Corinthians 7:27, 39; Romans 7:2*).¹⁷ The last clause of this verse is a little confusing but the key is found in *Romans 12:18* – **If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men**. It would not be very pleasant if the pagan wanted out of the marriage and the believer fought it too much. The Christian should try to maintain the marriage but, if the believer departs, the Christian is bound by God’s call to peace. Sometimes peace is only possible by separating the warring parties. (Incidentally, would this not be reason enough, if properly understood, to cause a believer to refuse marriage to an unbeliever?)

7:16 – With another explanatory **γάρ** (“for”), Paul gives the reason for maintaining peace by remaining with an unbelieving spouse – the possibility of their eternal salvation. Peter uses similar language in his epistle – *1 Peter 3:1* – **Wives, likewise, be submissive to your own husbands, that even if some do not obey the word, they, without a word, may be won by the conduct of their wives,**

17 But as God has distributed to each one, as the Lord has called (καλεω**) each one, so let him walk (**περιπατέω**). And so I ordain (**διατάσσω**) in all the churches (**ἐκκλησία**). 18 Was anyone called (**καλέω**) while circumcised? Let him not become uncircumcised. Was anyone called while uncircumcised? Let him not be circumcised. 19 Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing, but keeping the commandments of God *is what matters*. 20 Let each one remain (**μένω**) in the same calling (**κλήσις**) in which he was called (**καλέω**). 21 Were you called (**καλέω**) while a slave (**δουλος**)? Do not be concerned about it; but (**ἀλλά**) if you can be made free, rather use *it*. 22 For (**γάρ**) he who is called (**καλέω**) in the Lord while a slave (**δοῦλος**) is the Lord’s freedman. Likewise he who is called (**καλέω**) while free is Christ’s slave (**δοῦλος**). 23 You were bought (**ἀγοράζω**) at a price; do not become slaves (**δοῦλος**) of men (**ἄνθρωπος**). 24 Brethren (**αδελφός**), let each one remain (**μένω**) with God in that state in which he was called (**καλέω**).**

7:17 – For the next eight verses, Paul is going to set forth the theme of this entire chapter: social position does not affect Christianity. Observe the more literal reading in the NASB: **Only, as the Lord has assigned to each one, as God has called each, in this manner let him walk. And thus I direct in all the churches.** First, we must notice

¹⁴ Winters, H. (1987). Commentary on First Corinthians (1 Co 7:15). Greenville, SC: Carolina Christian.

¹⁵ Fee, G. D. (1987). The First Epistle to the Corinthians (pp. 302–303). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

¹⁶ Kittel, G., Friedrich, G., & Bromiley, G. W. (1985). Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (p. 186). Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans.

¹⁷ Taylor, M. (2014). 1 Corinthians. (E. R. Clendenen, Ed.) (Vol. 28, p. 176). Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group.

the individual responsibility for each person. Verse 18 will provide a specific example but, for now, Paul is stating that your social position at the time of your conversion is okay – “Stay as you are!” That’s the same thing he’s been saying about their marital relationships. And this is the same thing Paul ordains/commands/teaches in all the churches or congregations. Paul does not make this appeal in any other letters – but three other times in this one (4:17; 11:16 and 14:33) as a way of reminding them that their theology is “off track” – not Paul’s. This verse applies directly back to the situation of a Christian married to a pagan – but applies equally to any social position. Now Paul will specifically address four social positions.

7:18 – Were you a Jew – were you circumcised – when you were called “by the gospel” to Christ? (See 1:9 and 2 *Thessalonians* 2:14) Don’t become uncircumcised (ἐπισπάομαι – *eh-pee-spah’-o-mahee* – an *hapax legomenon*)! Stay as you are! We must remember that there is not a rift in Corinth between Jew and Gentile as a religious problem. This is quite different from the problems prompting the letter to the churches of Galatia. One of Corinth’s problems was a social one. And Paul uses an imperative: don’t be uncircumcised if you were a Jew when you became a Christian. And don’t be circumcised if you were a Gentile when you became a Christian.

7:19 – To a Jew, this statement would be “fighting words”. It is almost paradoxical since circumcision was one of the oldest commandments of God (*Genesis* 17:9-10).¹⁸ To the Jew, circumcision was everything – it was the sign of God’s covenant with the children of Abraham. But, again, this was not the issue in Corinth. Paul might well have said, “Marriage is nothing and celibacy is nothing.” Social status is irrelevant in Christianity. All that matters is keeping the commandments of God. Again, to the Jew, that is what circumcision was. But, to Paul and the Corinthians, there were other commands to be obeyed – not works of the law but obedience to faith.

7:20 – This imperative or command is a repetition of verse 17. In verse 18, Paul gives an example of remaining in the same social status after becoming a Christian. Then he gives the theological reason in verse 19. Now, in verse 20, he repeats what he said in verse 17 as well as what he has said throughout the chapter – “Stay as you are!”

7:21 – Paul introduces his second example but “Stay as you are!” is not the advice. Here Paul advises that one should not be concerned about their social status. Slavery was not normally a position one chose. But, if you were a slave when you became a Christian, don’t be concerned about it. The use of this particular example probably indicates this was one of the trouble spots within the church at Corinth. (Remember the division over the Lord’s Supper in chapter 11?) Don’t be concerned if you are a slave but don’t stay as you are if you have the opportunity to become free.

7:22 – When one is called by the gospel to be in Christ, he takes the necessary steps to get into Christ and rids himself of his sins. In the process, one becomes Christ’s slave. His social status in the world does not change – only his relationship to Christ. *Romans* 6:18 – **“And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness.”** Also, *Galatians* 3:28 – **“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”** Notice

¹⁸ Warden, D. (2016). 1 Corinthians. Truth for Today Commentary (1 Co 7:19). Searcy, AR: Resource Publications.

that both of these verses follow passages on how one gets into Christ – by baptism into His death. Although you become a slave to Christ, you are freed from the bondage of sin. The slave who becomes a Christian is now a freedman (**ἀπελεύθερος** – *ah-peh-loo'-theh-rohss*) of the Lord. This is another hapax legomenon found only here in scripture. It refers to a former slave who has been set free.¹⁹ And the one who was free (**ἐλεύθερος** – *eh-loo'-theh-rohss*) when called refers to the opposite of a slave. Verse 21 was an example of social classes (slaves and free men) just like verse 18 (circumcised and uncircumcised). Verse 19 gave the theological reason for Paul's example and verses 22-23 give the theological reason for verse 21. Slavery must not be viewed like that of 19th century America. Probably a third of Corinth's population was comprised of slaves – and these sometimes fared better than the free.²⁰ But the contrast Paul is bringing out is that the slave belongs to someone else like a piece of property and he will emphasize this in verse 23.

7:23 – Repeating the words of 6:20, Paul stresses that the Corinthian Christians have been bought with a price – the blood of Christ. Therefore, we belong to Him – He owns us. We are His slaves – His servants. Whatever our social status was before – slave or free, we now belong to Christ. Our social status hasn't changed – just our spiritual status. And, since we were bought with a price, Paul gives us a command: Don't become slaves of men! The Pharisees told Jesus that they were never in bondage to any man. Jesus then replied in *John 8:34*, “**Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin.**” Is that not the constant battle we fight? Not to become slaves to the man-made system of our world – our music, books, movies, TV shows, material possessions, etc.?

7:24 – Now Paul repeats the idea of verses 17 and 20: Stay in the social position you were in when you were called into Christ. But the real command is to remain with God. It doesn't mean you can't move up in social status, but it doesn't matter if you don't. The point is to stay on God's side. It is reminiscent of the question of Moses after Aaron and the children of Israel worshiped the golden calf – *Exodus 32.26* – “**Whoever is on the Lord's side?**” If being on the Lord's side requires a change in status, make the change. But social status counts for nothing in God's sight.

25 Now concerning (Περὶ δέ) **virgins** (παρθένος): I have no commandment from the Lord; yet I give judgment as one whom the Lord in His mercy *has made* trustworthy (πιστός). **26 I suppose therefore that this is good** (καλός) **because of the present distress** (ἀνάγκη) —that *it is good* (καλός) **for a man** (ἄνθρωπος) **to remain as he is:** **27 Are you bound** (δέω) **to a wife** (γυνή)? **Do not seek** (ζητέω) **to be loosed** (λυσίς). **Are you loosed** (λύω) **from a wife** (γυνή)? **Do not seek** (ζητέω) **a wife** (γυνή). **28 But even if you do marry** (γαμέω), **you have not sinned** (ἁμαρτάνω); and **if a virgin** (παρθένος) **marries** (γαμέω), **she has not sinned** (ἁμαρτάνω). **Nevertheless such will have trouble in the flesh** (σάρξ), **but I would spare you.**

¹⁹Ellingworth, P., Hatton, H., & Ellingworth, P. (1995). A handbook on Paul's first letter to the Corinthians (p. 162). New York: United Bible Societies.

²⁰ Fee, G. D. (1987). The First Epistle to the Corinthians (p. 319). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

7:25 – As we begin to look at this section, there are some difficulties to be acknowledged. Our interpretation will hinge on the Greek word *παρθένος* (*par-thin'-ose*) – translated “virgins” in the NKJV. But, first, notice how this verse begins with “**Now concerning**” (Περί δέ) just like the chapter began in verse 1 – **Now concerning the things of which you wrote to me**. We can only assume that Paul is turning to another matter raised in their letter. Remember he has addressed all those who were either married or formerly married in verses 2-16. Now he will address those who have never been married – the virgins. I believe this section of material includes verses 25-38. The primary reason for this is the beginning of verse 38 – “**So then**” – which indicates Paul is drawing a conclusion or wrapping up what he has been writing. Within this section, we will further subdivide it into three subsections for Paul’s argument: Verses 25-28; verses 29-35; and verses 36-38. (This leaves verses 39-40 as a final word to women about the entire chapter.) Verse 25 opens with Paul turning to a matter raised in their letter about those who have never been married or the virgins. Although the word “virgins” could be either male or female, the singular term (verses 28, 34, 36 and 37) used in the remainder of this section is feminine. Also, I propose that “virgin” or *παρθένος* refers to a young betrothed woman – similar to the ESV. This is the same word – *παρθένος* – used in *Luke 1:27* – **to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary**. This interpretation says that those same people at Corinth who would cease sexual relations in marriage, or even divorce their spouses, for higher spirituality were advising young women to break off their engagements. As Paul did earlier in verse 12, he is addressing an issue which the Lord did not specifically address in His teaching (as recorded in the gospels). Paul seems to express his opinion more in this section than in the first section of this chapter which was full of imperatives or commands. He does not appeal to his apostleship and authority but rather to the Lord’s mercy. He gives a judgment or opinion – as one who is trustworthy or faithful to God’s word.

7:26 – This is a very confusing verse and translators as well as commentators are perplexed at its meaning. It sounds like Paul is expressing his opinion based on the current circumstances – the present distress. We’ll come back to this but, in Paul’s opinion, it is good to “stay as you are.” Man (*ἄνθρωπος*) should probably be taken in the generic sense keeping in mind that “virgins” or “betrothed” in verse 25 could be generic – either male or female. But “present distress” is the real cause of confusion in this verse. Because of the present distress, Paul is going to tell them what is good for them – and that is to stay as you are (single). But what is this “present distress”? Some have thought it means the second coming of Christ but that assumes it is just around the corner. Although it may be, Paul doesn’t advocate Christians giving up marriage – that is the normal order of things. Also, an engagement was legally binding like marriage in those days. See the account of Joseph and Mary in *Matthew 1:18-25*. Perhaps nearer in time is the destruction of Jerusalem and this same word is used in *Luke 21:23*. And some have contended that it refers to the famine foretold by Agabus to occur in the days of Claudius Caesar (*Acts 11:28*).²¹ The word translated “distress” literally means “necessity” or that in life which puts one under compulsion. Paul uses it in 9:16. He also uses it in verse 37 of this chapter. Whatever the necessity or distress, it referred to something already

²¹ Ciampa, R. E., & Rosner, B. S. (2010). *The First Letter to the Corinthians* (pp. 335–338). Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

occurring at Corinth. In light of the increased troubles that will befall married persons (verse 28), the single person would do well to remain that way.

7:27 – This verse is similar to verses 18 and 21 in response to Paul’s statement to “stay as you are” in verses 17 and 20. The word “free” (λύσις) is not used elsewhere to denote “divorce”. It does mean to be discharged from a contract. And this would probably apply as well to the engaged. “Are you under obligation to a woman? Do not seek to break off the obligation. Are you free from such obligations? Do not seek a wife.” In context, this seems to be the best solution. However, he could be referring to both marrieds and singles.²²

7:28 – Marriage is the normal state. Paul has given his advice to stay single because of the present distress; however, he says you have not sinned if you disregard his advice and marry anyway. He does say that the married couple will have fleshly troubles, but Paul spares us the details. Evidently, they would understand the meaning in view of the current crisis.

29 But this I say, brethren (ἀδελφός), the time (καιρός) is short, so that from now on even those who have wives (γυνή) should be as though they had none, 30 those who weep (κλαίω) as though they did not weep (κλαίω), those who rejoice (χαίρω) as though they did not rejoice (χαίρω), those who buy (ἀγοράζω) as though they did not possess (κατέχω), 31 and those who use (χράομαι) this world (κοσμος) as not misusing (καταχράομαι) it. For (γάρ) the form (σχημα) of this world (κόσμος) is passing away (παράγω).

7:29-31 – Verses 29-35 form the second section of Paul’s argument. Paul has just stated that the singles who marry are not sinning. And now, he gives some further explanation. “This is what I mean” or, literally, “But I am saying this, brothers” (addressing Christians): **“the time is short.”** Many believe this refers to the second coming of Christ or the *parousia* (Greek παρουσία – a presence, arrival or coming – 15:23; 16:17). They hold that Paul is stating that it won’t be long until Christ comes again. However, Paul elsewhere urges blameless conduct when considering the second coming (cf. 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11; Philippians 1:9-11) – not injunctions on marriage. I believe Paul is attempting to correct their view of things and put it in the proper perspective. In 4:8, we found that the Corinthians thought they had arrived spiritually: **You are already full! You are already rich! You have reigned as kings without us!** And, in this chapter, we have learned that arriving spiritually – for some of the Corinthians – included celibacy. Others view this shortened time as referring to the present distress (verse 26) – that it would be better to remain single – that those who have wives should live as though they had none. The truth probably lies somewhere between these last two views. It is sometimes difficult in the New Testament to differentiate between impending persecutions, current crises, the destruction of Jerusalem and the *parousia*. I believe Paul is trying to give us the proper perspective for Christians. Before Jesus was born, the future awaited the promised Messiah. When He ascended into heaven, time was indeed shortened or compressed. The future now awaits His return and final judgment. Our eschatological perspective should be the same as that of Paul’s readers in the first century. Consider

²² Fee, G. D. (1987). The First Epistle to the Corinthians (pp. 331–332). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

Peter's advice in 2 *Peter* 3:11-16. As we first see mountains in the distance, they may appear very small; however, as we drive toward them, they appear to grow and get larger. We need to live each day as if each breath was our last. This is one of the most difficult challenges we face because we get bogged down in so many things. Yet, if we took this to the extreme, we would be very nervous people. And Paul is going to write in verse 32 that he wants us to be free from anxieties. Now, let's return to the text in verses 29-31 where Paul lists five things that characterize everyone's existence – marriage, mourning, rejoicing, buying and dealing with the world. And then he says that we should do those things as if we were not doing them. This is pure rhetoric and not to be taken literally – whether Paul is talking about some current crisis or Christ's return. In either case, life goes on. Paul is not telling husbands to live as if they didn't have wives (although some do). The key to this passage is the last phrase introduced by an explanatory "for" (γάρ) – **For the form (σχῆμα – *shkay'-mah*) of this world is passing away**. Christians must live with a different perspective than others because we **"look for new heavens and a new earth"** (2 *Peter* 3:13). I love my wife, but my life is more than Gail. My life is more than misery and mourning – but it's also more than a constant pursuit of what makes me happy. It must be more than the accumulation of material things which I buy. And, it's more than using the earth for my benefit. All of these things are temporary, and I must live my life in view of eternity. (See *Matthew* 6:24-33.) This present world is passing away – it is happening now! So why does Paul include this? I believe he is trying to correct the Corinthians' view of reality.

32 But (δέ) I want (θέλω) you to be without care (ἀμεριμνος). He who is unmarried (ἄγαμος) cares (μεριμνάω) for the things of the Lord (κύριος)—how he may please (ἀρέσκω) the Lord (κύριος). 33 But he who is married (γαμέω) cares about (μεριμνάω) the things of the world (κόσμος)—how he may please (ἀρέσκω) his wife (γυνή). 34 There is a difference between a wife (γυνή) and a virgin (παρθένος). The unmarried woman (ἄγαμος) cares about (μεριμνάω) the things of the Lord (κύριος), that she may be holy (ἅγιος) both in body (σῶμα) and in spirit (πνεῦμα). But she who is married (γαμέω) cares about (μεριμνάω) the things of the world (κόσμος)—how she may please (ἀρέσκω) her husband (άνήρ). 35 And this I say (λέγω) for your own profit (σύμφορος), not that I may put a leash on you, but for what is proper, and that you may serve the Lord (κύριος) without distraction (ἀπερυσπαστως).

7:32 – Paul now turns to another theme with the conjunction δέ indicating this transition: **But I want you to be without care**. As long as you are in this present world, I want you to be free from anxieties or cares. If we remember we're in the middle of Paul's argument – verses 29-35, it may help us. He began this section in verse 29 by addressing the brothers or Christians – the church at Corinth; therefore, this verse is a continuation of that address. Paul wants all Christians to be free from anxiety – and this fits the context from the previous verses where Paul talks about our temporary existence. This is certainly in harmony with Paul's charge in *Philippians* 4:6 (where μεριμνάω is also used). Before discussing the second part of this verse, there is a play on words in the Greek which does not appear very well in English. The Greek word for **"without care"** in the NKJV is ἀμεριμνος. The verb for **"cares"** in the NKJV is μεριμνάω. The newer translations try to show this, but I don't want you to miss it. You may want to underline **"without care"** in the first part of verse 32. And then underline the verb form **"cares"** in the latter part of verse 32, again in verse 33, and twice in verse 34. We change English words to make them opposite by a similar process with prefixes. Compare "mature" and

“immature”. This play on words may help us see Paul’s use of a little humor in his advice. Consider the second half of verse 32: He who is unmarried cares for the things of the Lord – how he may please the Lord. Paul is addressing Christians and we must now ask ourselves the question: “Is this what bachelor Christians are concerned about – how they can please the Lord?” This is the ideal; yet Paul states it as a fact!

7:33-34 – In contrast to the pious bachelor in verse 32, the married man is anxious about the things of the world – how to please his wife! Before concluding that married men are less righteous than unmarried men, let’s continue looking at the next verse. There are many manuscript differences in verse 34. The KJV and NKJV translations place a period at the end of verse 33 whereas the ASV as well as most newer translations include the first part of verse 34 with verse 33. This latter approach seems to better fit the context of what Paul is trying to say. While the bachelor only has to be concerned with pleasing the Lord, the married man must also be concerned with pleasing his wife – and, so, his interests are divided. As Paul has done throughout this chapter, he gives equal treatment to the women. He has just addressed both the married and unmarried man. Now he turns to the women – first to the unmarried. The unmarried woman cares about the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and in spirit. Like the unmarried man, the unmarried or engaged woman is concerned about the things of the Lord – defined here as being holy in body and spirit. The Corinthians would probably love this reading because some of them apparently thought that self-denial raised their spirituality. However, “holy” does not mean ethical achievement – it is being set apart or consecrated for God’s service. Once again, Paul states as a fact that the unmarried woman is anxious about the things of the Lord. In contrast, the married woman is concerned about worldly things – how to please her husband. The married person is truly divided – pleasing God and pleasing their spouse. But this does not make them an inferior Christian in relation to unmarried Christians.

7:35 – “**And this I say**” refers back to all he has said beginning in verse 32 – so that they could be free from anxieties. The purpose of what has been said in verses 32-34 is stated in three parts: First, it is said for their own benefit or advantage. The Greek word **σύμφωρος** is used only twice in the New Testament – here and in 10:33. Secondly, it was not said to restrict them – or literally “to put or throw a noose on someone.” The word for “leash” (**βρόχος** – *broke-’ose*) is an *hapax legomenon* – found only here in the New Testament – and is a hunting or warring term.²³ Thirdly, what Paul has said has been for what is proper and that the Corinthians may serve the Lord “**without distraction**” or “**unhindered**” (**ἀπερισπάστως** – *ah-pehr-iss-pahs-’toce* – another *hapax legomenon*). Paul has given his best advice on this matter to keep Corinthian asceticism (self-denial for religious reasons) from preventing marriage. He wants them to be free from anxiety in whatever marital state they choose.

36 But (δέ) if any man thinks he is behaving improperly (ἀσχημονέω) toward his virgin (παρθένος), if she is past the flower of youth (ὑπέρακμος), and thus it must be, let him do what he wishes (θέλω). He does not sin (ἀμαρτάνω); let them marry (γαμέω). 37 Nevertheless he who stands (ἵστημι) steadfast in his heart (καρδία), having no necessity (ἀνάγκη), but has power (ἐξουσία) over his own will (θέλημα),

²³Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000). A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature (3rd ed., p. 184). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

and has so determined (κρίνω) in his heart (καρδία) that he will keep his virgin (παρθένος), does well (καλῶς). 38 So then he who gives her in marriage does well, but he who does not give her in marriage (ἐκγαμίζω) does better.

7:36 – These next three verses comprise a very difficult passage. Paul is addressing the man who is engaged – and is probably the actual situation facing the Corinthians. (Another widely held view is that the man is the father of a young woman who refuses to give permission for her to marry. However, in my opinion, this does not fit contextually as well as a man and his fiancé.) Without getting into all the details of the text, Paul’s advice is to let the couple marry – it is not a sin. Actually, Paul says the man is not sinning if he marries his fiancé. There are two conditions prompting this marriage. One is if the man thinks he is behaving improperly (ἀσχημονέω – *ahss-kay-mo-neh´o*) toward his betrothed. This Greek word is used only here and in 13:5 and refers to acting contrary to what the public considers standard, i.e. “disgracefully”. Secondly, “**if she is past the flower of youth**”. The Greek word here (ὑπέρακμος – *hoop-ehr´-ahk-mose*) is literally “over the highest point” – past one’s prime. The problem is that the Greek allows for this to refer to either a male or female. If it refers to the female, she is past the normal marriage age. However, when referring to the male, it denotes having strong sexual impulses. The latter seems to be the meaning here as it is similar to the situation in 1 Corinthians 7:9.²⁴

7:37 – In contrast, the man who chooses not to marry also does well. This is a man who knows where he stands and where he is going in life. He is under no necessity (same Greek word translated “distress” in verse 26) to marry but he also has his desire under control. He decides to simply remain engaged to his fiancé.

7:38 – Paul now draws a conclusion from his entire argument beginning back in verse 25 concerning the betrothed as well as statements made in the preceding two verses. The problem is that Paul changes from the verb meaning “to marry” (γαμέω – *gah-meh´o*) to a verb which can mean “to give in marriage” (ἐκγαμίζω – *ek-gahm-eed´zo*). However, the better manuscripts upon which the newer translations are based have the Greek verb γαμίζω (*gahm-eed´zo*) twice in this verse instead – a verb which can carry the dual meanings for “marry” or “give in marriage”. I believe Paul was using another form for variety. It was not a sin for a man to marry his fiancé but, for whatever was going on in Corinth at the time – the “present distress”, the man who refrained from marriage would do even better. Duane Warden concludes his comments on this verse based on γαμίζω: “However, the dearth of this verb in the New Testament and elsewhere, coupled with the context, suggests Paul was just expressing in an alternate way what he had already said in verse 26. That is, he was repeating that the present distress made marriage inadvisable, but those who married anyway were not sinning.”²⁵

39 A wife (γυνή) **is bound** (δέω) **by law** (νόμος) **as long as her husband** (ἀνὴρ) **lives; but if her husband** (ἀνὴρ) **dies, she is at liberty to be married** (γαμέω) **to whom she wishes** (θέλω), **only in the Lord.** 40 But she is **happier** (μακάριος) if she remains as

²⁴ Ellingworth, P., Hatton, H., & Ellingworth, P. (1995). A handbook on Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians (p. 177). New York: United Bible Societies.

²⁵ Warden, D. (2016). 1 Corinthians. Truth for Today Commentary (1 Co 7:38). Searcy, AR: Resource Publications.

she is, according to my judgment (γνώμη)—and I think I also have the Spirit (πνεῦμα) of God.

7:39 – These last two verses seem a little out of place at first glance, but it may be that Paul is skillfully addressing the females in a summary of the entire chapter. This verse returns to the subject of verses 1-24. This presents the Christian view of marriage similar to what is found in *Romans* 7:2. If the husband dies, the woman is free to remarry – although Paul adds “**only in the Lord**”. Reading the phrase “**in the Lord**” from *Romans* 16:11 would lead me to believe that she should marry only a Christian. That is certainly the implication in the Greek – it must be a Christian marriage.²⁶

7:40 – Paul has just said that it is okay for a widow to remarry – but “**only in the Lord**”. But, in this verse, he adds his opinion on the matter – an opinion he has consistently mentioned throughout: it is better to remain single in view of the present distress. Paul makes it clear that he is only stating his opinion, but it is an inspired opinion. The Greek adjective translated “**happier**” is μακάριος (*mah-kar'-ee-ose*) – the same word used in the beatitudes as “**blessed**”. Here it would be translated “**she is more blessed if**” she remains single.²⁷ It is possible that Paul is also getting at those Corinthians who thought they had achieved a higher spirituality than the apostle Paul. As we look back at chapter 7, we can see that Paul has addressed every group – the married, the previously married (widowers and widows) and the engaged.

SECTION OUTLINE SEVEN (1 CORINTHIANS 7)

Paul talks about marriage.

I. MARRIAGE—SOME GENERAL INSTRUCTIONS (7:1–2, 7–9, 17–24, 29–35)

A. The argument (7:1–2, 7–9, 32–35): Is it better to be married than not to be married?

1. The advantages of marriage (7:2, 7, 9)

a. It helps prevent immoral actions and attitudes (7:2, 9).

b. It is God’s will for many people to marry (7:7).

2. The advantages of remaining single (7:1, 8, 32–35): For the most part, a single person is free to devote all his or her attention to the work of the Lord, having no need to share time with a spouse or children.

B. The answer (7:17–24, 29–31): Which course is the best? It depends totally on God’s perfect plan for each believer.

1. God’s will must govern any decisions concerning marriage (7:17).

2. Pleasing God is the supreme objective (7:18–19).

3. We are not our own but have been bought and paid for by Christ (7:20–24).

4. Even if married, Christ must occupy first place in our life (7:29–31).

²⁶ Ellingworth, P., Hatton, H., & Ellingworth, P. (1995). A handbook on Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians (p. 179). New York: United Bible Societies.

²⁷ Ciampa, R. E., & Rosner, B. S. (2010). The First Letter to the Corinthians (p. 366). Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

II. MARRIAGE—SOME SPECIFIC INDIVIDUALS: (7:3–6, 10–16, 25–28, 36–40):
Paul now addresses four groups.

- A. Saved couples (7:3–6, 10–11)**
 - 1. Both are to submit their bodies to each other (7:3–4).
 - 2. Both must agree if physical intimacy is set aside for a while to facilitate prayer and fasting (7:5–6).
 - 3. Both must strive to stay together and not divorce (7:10–11).
- B. Spiritually mixed couples (7:12–16)**
 - 1. The saved spouse should continue living with the unsaved spouse if possible (7:12–13).
 - 2. This action may result in the salvation of the unsaved spouse (7:14).
 - 3. The saved spouse should allow the unsaved spouse to depart if he or she insists on it (7:15–16).
- C. Virgins (7:25–28, 36–38):** Paul advises the unmarried not to rush into marriage.
- D. A widow (7:39–40):** She is free to marry another believer.²⁸

²⁸ Willmington, H. L. (1999). The Outline Bible (1 Co 7). Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers.