

The Book of 1 Corinthians, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 6: Marriage, Singleness, and Calling

1 Corinthians 7:1-40

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This chapter addresses marriage, singleness, sexuality, and the permanence of the marriage covenant, and what is doctrinally at stake is God's good design for these things and the Lord's own teaching about marriage. Paul honors both marriage and singleness, refuses to rank them, and calls believers to contentment in their calling. The teacher should present marriage as God's good and permanent design, a covenant of mutual self-giving between a man and a woman, and singleness as a genuine gift and calling that frees a person for undivided devotion to the Lord, never as a second-class state. Be especially careful and compassionate with the questions of separation, divorce, and remarriage. Paul, echoing Jesus, upholds the permanence of marriage and calls couples not to separate. The case of a deserting unbeliever in 7:15 has been understood in more than one way among faithful Christians, and the teacher should present the high view of marriage clearly while handling the difficult cases with humility, urging careful study of all that Scripture says (including Matthew 19) and the guidance of godly elders, rather than pronouncing confident verdicts on every painful situation in the room.

At the same time, this chapter is deeply formational. It calls married believers to self-giving love rather than self-seeking, single believers to embrace their season as a gift, and all believers to a contentment that does not pin holiness or happiness on changing their circumstances. It lifts every reader's eyes to the shortness of time and the passing of this present world.

Aim, then, for both conviction and compassion. Send students home with a high view of marriage, a renewed honor for singleness, and a settled contentment in their calling, and handle the tender questions of divorce and remarriage in a way that is faithful to the Lord's teaching, respectful of conscience, and gentle toward those carrying real wounds. The heaviest doctrinal block belongs at Question 9; give it the most time and the most care.

Question 1

Student Question:

Paul teaches that within marriage husband and wife each owe the other, that the husband does not have authority over his own body but the wife does, and likewise the wife's over the husband's, and that they should not deprive one another (7:2-5). What does this mutual self-giving teach about God's good design for marriage and about the way husband and wife are to serve rather than use each other?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Set the context. The Corinthians had asked about sex and marriage, and some were arguing that abstaining even within marriage was more spiritual. Paul corrects this with a robust, positive view of marital intimacy.

Draw out the striking mutuality of 7:3–4. In a culture that gave the husband all the authority, Paul says the husband's body belongs to his wife and the wife's to her husband. Marriage is mutual self-giving, not the dominance of one over the other.

Explain the practical counsel of 7:5. Spouses are not to deprive one another, except by agreement for a season of prayer, so that the enemy does not exploit a lack of self-control. Intimacy is a gift to be guarded, not a weapon to be withheld.

Lift it to its design. Marriage reflects covenant faithfulness and self-giving love, a faint picture of how Christ gave himself for the church (Ephesians 5). To serve rather than use one's spouse is to live out that pattern.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Marriage as God's good design, including the goodness of marital intimacy (7:2–5)
- Mutual self-giving and shared authority between husband and wife (7:3–4)
- Serving rather than using one's spouse
- Marriage as a reflection of covenant, self-giving love (Ephesians 5)
- Guarding intimacy rather than weaponizing or withholding it (7:5)

Discussion Prompts

- What is striking about the mutuality Paul describes in marriage?
- How does marriage picture self-giving rather than self-seeking love?
- Why does Paul warn against depriving one another?

Question 2

Student Question:

Whether you are married now or hope to be one day, marriage in Paul's vision is about laying down your rights for the good of another. Where are you tempted to be self-focused in your closest relationships, keeping score, withholding, or insisting on your own way? What would self-giving love look like there this week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question applies marital self-giving to whatever closest relationships the student has, present or hoped for.

Help students see the universal pull toward self-focus: keeping score, withholding affection or help, insisting on our own way. These quietly corrode intimacy.

Set self-giving love against it. The gospel pattern is to lay down our rights for another's good, as Christ did for us.

Aim for one concrete act. Ask each student to name one relationship and one specific way they could practice self-giving rather than self-seeking this week.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Self-giving versus self-seeking in close relationships
- Score-keeping and withholding as corrosions of intimacy
- The gospel pattern of laying down our rights for another
- Concrete love in everyday relationships

Discussion Prompts

- Where are you most tempted toward self-focus in your closest relationships?
- What would self-giving love look like there this week?
- How does Christ's example shape the way you love?

Question 3

Student Question:

Paul writes, "I wish that all were as I myself am," single and devoted to the Lord, while recognizing that "each has his own gift from God" (7:7), and he describes the single person's freedom for "undivided devotion to the Lord" (7:32–35). How does this passage dignify singleness as a genuine calling and gift, rather than a second-class or temporary condition?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Lift up Paul's high regard for singleness. He wishes others could share the freedom he enjoys, while acknowledging that singleness, like marriage, is a gift from God, given to different people in different ways (7:7).

Open up the freedom Paul describes in 7:32–35. The unmarried person can give undivided attention to the things of the Lord, free from many of the legitimate concerns that rightly occupy the married. This is not a deficiency but an opportunity.

Correct the common assumption. Singleness is not a waiting room, a failure, or a lesser calling. Jesus himself was single, as was Paul, and both lived the most fruitful lives in history. The church should honor singleness as Scripture does.

Apply it to the body. A congregation that treats marriage as the only normal goal quietly wounds its single members. Honoring singleness as a genuine calling blesses the whole church.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Singleness as a genuine gift and calling, not a lesser state (7:7)
- The single person's freedom for undivided devotion to the Lord (7:32–35)
- The examples of Jesus and Paul, single and supremely fruitful
- Honoring singleness as Scripture does, within the body
- Both marriage and singleness as gifts from God

Discussion Prompts

- How does Paul dignify singleness in this chapter?
- What freedom does he say the single person has?
- How can the church better honor its single members?

Question 4

Student Question:

Paul models a deep contentment and usefulness in singleness, free to serve the Lord without distraction. If you are single, how might God be inviting you to embrace this season as a gift for undivided devotion rather than merely enduring it? If you are married, how can you honor and include the single members of Christ's body? Name one concrete way.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question splits gently along the student's situation, inviting both single and married believers to respond.

For single students, frame the season as a gift to be embraced for undivided devotion, not merely endured while waiting for marriage. Help them imagine what wholehearted service might look like now.

For married students, turn the question outward toward honoring and including single members, who can feel overlooked in marriage-centered church life.

Aim for one concrete step from each. Ask single students to name one way to use their freedom for the Lord, and married students to name one way to honor a single brother or sister.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Embracing singleness as a gift rather than enduring it
- Using present freedom for undivided devotion
- Married believers honoring and including single members
- Concrete love across different seasons of life

Discussion Prompts

- If single, how might you embrace this season as a gift for the Lord?

- If married, how can you honor the single members of the body?
- What is one concrete step you can take this week?

Question 5

Student Question:

Three times Paul tells believers to remain in the situation in which they were called, “let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him” (7:17–24). What does this teach about contentment, calling, and the danger of always thinking that holiness or happiness depends on changing our circumstances?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Bring out the threefold refrain of 7:17–24: remain in the situation in which you were called and live it for the Lord. Paul applies it to circumcision and slavery, but the principle is broad.

Explain the heart of it. God can be served and glorified in nearly any lawful circumstance. Holiness and usefulness do not wait on a change of status; they are available right now, right where we are.

Guard the balance. Paul is not forbidding all change (he notes that a slave who can gain freedom should do so). He is uprooting the assumption that our spiritual life is on hold until our circumstances improve.

Apply it to contentment. The restless heart always locates the good life one change away. Paul calls us to a contentment that frees us to serve God fully in the present.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Contentment in the calling and situation God has assigned (7:17–24)
- Holiness and usefulness available now, not after circumstances change
- Serving God in ordinary, unchanged circumstances
- The difference between godly contentment and forbidding all change
- The restlessness that always pins life on the next change

Discussion Prompts

- What does Paul mean by remaining in the situation God assigned?
- Why is it dangerous to think holiness depends on changing our circumstances?
- How is contentment different from passivity?

Question 6

Student Question:

Restlessness whispers that we would finally be content, or finally be useful to God, if only our situation were different. Where do you hear that whisper most, in your singleness or marriage, your job, your living situation, your stage of life? What would it look like to serve God wholeheartedly right where he has placed you?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question takes the refrain of contentment into the student's own restlessness. Most of us have a place where we are quietly waiting for life to begin.

Help students locate the whisper honestly: in singleness or marriage, in a job, a home, a stage of life. Naming it loosens its grip.

Set wholehearted present service against it. The invitation is not to suppress godly desires for change, but to refuse to postpone devotion until those desires are met.

Aim for one present act of service. Ask each student to name one way they could serve God fully right where they are this week, rather than waiting for a different situation.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Restlessness that postpones life until circumstances change
- Naming the whisper of discontent honestly
- Wholehearted service in the present situation
- Holding godly desires without postponing devotion

Discussion Prompts

- Where do you most hear the whisper that life will begin once things change?
- How is that discontent affecting your devotion to the Lord?
- How could you serve God fully right where you are this week?

Question 7

Student Question:

Paul writes that "the appointed time has grown very short," and urges believers to live so that those who have dealings with the world are "not engrossed in it, for the present form of this world is passing away" (7:29–31). How should the shortness of time and the passing of this present world shape the way a Christian holds marriage, possessions, and every earthly circumstance?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Open up Paul's eschatological perspective. "The appointed time has grown very short," and "the present form of this world is passing away." The whole frame of this age is temporary.

Explain the counsel that flows from it (7:29–31): hold earthly things loosely. Those who have dealings with the world should not be engrossed in it. Marriage, mourning, rejoicing, buying, all are real, but none is ultimate.

Clarify Paul's intent. He is not devaluing marriage or normal life; he has just affirmed both. He is reordering them under eternity, so that nothing temporary takes the place that belongs to God and his kingdom.

Apply it. An eternal perspective keeps us from clutching at this passing world as though it were permanent, and frees us to invest in what lasts.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The shortness of time and the passing of this present world (7:29–31)
- Holding earthly things loosely without despising them
- Reordering marriage, possessions, and circumstances under eternity
- Freedom to invest in what lasts
- Nothing temporary allowed to take God's place

Discussion Prompts

- How should the shortness of time shape the way we hold earthly things?
- Is Paul devaluing marriage and normal life, or reordering them? How can you tell?
- What does it mean to be in the world but not engrossed in it?

Question 8

Student Question:

Paul calls us to hold the things of this world loosely because they are temporary. What are you holding too tightly, a relationship, a possession, a plan, an ambition, as though this present world were permanent? How might an eternal perspective loosen your grip and free you to live for what lasts?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question presses the eternal perspective onto a specific attachment. We all hold something too tightly, as though this world were permanent.

Help students name it concretely: a relationship, a possession, a plan, an ambition. The test is what we fear losing most, or what we organize our lives around.

Offer the loosening that hope brings. When our treasure is secure in heaven, we can hold earthly goods with open hands, enjoying them as gifts without being enslaved to them.

Aim for one act of loosening. Ask each student to name one thing they are gripping too tightly and one way to hold it more loosely this week.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Identifying what we hold too tightly
- An eternal perspective that loosens our grip
- Enjoying earthly goods as gifts without enslavement
- Investing in what lasts

Discussion Prompts

- What are you holding too tightly, as if this world were permanent?
- How might an eternal perspective loosen your grip?
- What would holding it loosely look like this week?

Question 9

Student Question:

Paul, echoing the Lord himself, charges that a wife “should not separate from her husband” and a husband “should not divorce his wife” (7:10–11), gives careful guidance to a believer married to an unbeliever, including the case where the unbeliever departs (7:12–16), and says a widow is free to remarry “only in the Lord” (7:39). What do these verses teach about God’s high and permanent view of marriage, and how should the church handle the painful and complex questions surrounding separation, divorce, and remarriage with both faithfulness to Scripture and compassion for those who are hurting?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest and most pastorally sensitive block of the lesson, and it calls for both firmness and gentleness. Begin with the clear, high view of marriage that Paul, echoing the Lord, sets out: the wife should not separate from her husband, and the husband should not divorce his wife (7:10–11). This is not Paul’s private opinion; he attaches it to the command of the Lord himself.

Anchor this in Jesus’ own teaching. In Matthew 19:3–9 the Lord traces marriage back to creation, where God joined one man and one woman as one flesh, and declares, “What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.” God’s design is lifelong, permanent union. Divorce was never part of his intention; it entered because of hardness of heart. The teacher should let students feel the weight of how seriously God takes the marriage covenant.

Walk carefully through the mixed-marriage case in 7:12–16. A believer married to an unbeliever should not initiate divorce; the believing spouse has a sanctifying influence on the home, and there is hope for the unbelieving partner and the children. But if the unbelieving spouse insists

on leaving, the believer is “not enslaved” in such cases, and is to let them go, for God has called us to peace. Christians who love the Scriptures have understood the precise application of this verse in more than one way, especially regarding whether and when remarriage is permitted. Present the verse honestly, note that it is debated, and resist the urge to settle every hard case with a quick verdict.

Hold the high view and the pastoral care together. Marriage is permanent and divorce is a grievous tearing of what God joined; this must be taught plainly, and couples should be helped to fight for their marriages. At the same time, many in any congregation carry deep wounds from divorce, some of their own doing and some done to them. Speak the truth without crushing the brokenhearted, and point them to the forgiveness and new beginning available in Christ. Note that 7:39 adds that a widow is free to remarry, but “only in the Lord,” a reminder that Christians should marry fellow believers.

Close with wise counsel rather than blanket rulings. Because these questions touch real marriages, consciences, and pasts, urge students facing them to study all that Scripture teaches, including Jesus’ words in Matthew 19, prayerfully and with the help of godly elders, seeking to honor God’s design while extending the grace of Christ. The goal is faithfulness to the Lord’s teaching and compassion for those who are hurting, held together.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God’s high and permanent view of marriage, rooted in the Lord’s own command (7:10–11; Matthew 19:3–9)
- Marriage as the lifelong union of one man and one woman, joined by God (Genesis 2)
- Divorce as a grievous tearing never part of God’s original design
- Careful, compassionate guidance for a believer married to an unbeliever (7:12–16)
- The desertion case of 7:15 presented honestly and humbly, as a matter faithful Christians have understood in more than one way
- Marrying only in the Lord (7:39), and the place of godly elders and careful study in hard cases
- Truth about marriage and grace toward the wounded held together

Discussion Prompts

- What do these verses, with Matthew 19, teach about how seriously God views the marriage covenant?
- How should a believer relate to an unbelieving spouse, according to 7:12–16?
- How can the church speak the truth about marriage while showing compassion to those wounded by divorce?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across the whole chapter. Paul honors marriage, dignifies singleness, calls us to contentment in our calling, and lifts our eyes to the shortness of time. Name one specific way you sense Jesus forming you through these verses. What is the single truth from 1 Corinthians 7 that you most need to carry into this coming week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone asks students to gather the chapter and name one way Christ is forming them. Let them speak first.

If needed, recall the movements: the goodness of marriage and intimacy, the dignity of singleness, contentment in calling, the shortness of time, and the high view of the marriage covenant.

Be sensitive to the varied situations in the room, married, single, widowed, divorced. The chapter has a word of dignity and hope for each, and the capstone should land as good news, not pressure.

Push toward the specific and close in prayer that students would live their season wholeheartedly for the Lord this week.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Personal formation through contentment and devotion in one's calling
- A word of dignity for every season of life
- Living the present season wholeheartedly for the Lord
- Moving from general agreement to a specific, named response

Discussion Prompts

- Which part of this chapter pressed on you most, and why?
- What is the one truth from 1 Corinthians 7 you most need this week?
- What named step is God asking you to take in response?