

The Book of 1 Corinthians

Lesson 6: Marriage, Singleness, and Calling -- 1 Corinthians 7:1-40

Somewhere in the questions the Corinthians had sent to Paul was a tangle about sex, marriage, and singleness. Some in the church had swung to one extreme, treating the body as a playground with no rules. Others had swung to the opposite extreme, suggesting that the truly spiritual thing was to avoid sex and marriage altogether, even within marriage. Into this confusion Paul writes a remarkably balanced, tender, and practical chapter. He honors marriage. He honors singleness. He refuses to let anyone make either one a badge of superiority.

If you are married, Paul has searching words for you. Marriage is not a grudging concession; it is a covenant of mutual self-giving. He says something almost startling to ancient ears: the husband's body belongs to his wife, and the wife's body belongs to her husband. Neither is to use intimacy as a weapon or withhold it as leverage. Marriage, in Paul's vision, is two people laying down their rights to each other, a small daily picture of the way Christ gave himself for us.

If you are single, Paul has good news that our marriage-obsessed culture, and sometimes our marriage-obsessed churches, badly need to hear. Singleness is not a problem to be fixed or a waiting room before real life begins. Paul calls it a gift, and he speaks of the single person's freedom for "undivided devotion to the Lord." He himself is single, and he is not lonely or incomplete; he is free, focused, and useful to God. Whatever your situation, married or single, never married or widowed, Paul's deeper word is the same: bloom where God has planted you, and live every season for the Lord.

Woven through the chapter is one of the hardest and most pastorally sensitive subjects in all of Scripture: the permanence of marriage and the heartbreak of its breaking. Paul, echoing the Lord himself, calls husband and wife not to separate. He gives careful, compassionate guidance to believers married to unbelievers. These are tender matters that touch real wounds in real lives, and they deserve to be handled with both the firmness of Scripture and the gentleness of Christ. Read this chapter prayerfully. It will dignify singleness, deepen marriage, and call all of us to live our one short life wholeheartedly for the Lord who bought us.

Group Discussion: Paul treats both marriage and singleness as good and even speaks of singleness as a gift that frees a person for "undivided devotion to the Lord" (7:35). Why do you think singleness is so often viewed, even in the church, as a lesser or incomplete state, and how might our congregations better honor and support both married and single members?

Personal Reflection: Paul urges believers to live faithfully in whatever situation God has placed them, content in their calling (7:17-24). Are you content in your current season, married or single, or are you quietly convinced that life will really begin only when your circumstances change? Where is discontent stealing your devotion to the Lord right now?

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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.
5. 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?
6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?

10. 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?

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Matthew 19:3–9, Jesus on God's design for marriage from the beginning; Genesis 2:18–25, the creation of marriage as one flesh; Ephesians 5:22–33, marriage as a picture of Christ and the church; Philippians 4:11–13, learning contentment in every circumstance; Matthew 6:19–21, storing up treasure in heaven rather than on earth