

7:1 Now concerning the things about which you wrote, it is good for a man not to touch a woman.

"Now concerning the things about which you wrote" shows that Paul's letter to the Corinthians is in part a response to a letter that he had received from them seeking direction on various issues. The phrase appears five more times in I Corinthians (7:25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1; 16:12).

What does "it is good for a man not to touch a woman" mean?

"To touch a woman" is a euphemism for sexual intercourse (Fee, Thiselton, 500; cf. Gen. 20:6; Ruth 2:9; Prov. 6:29). The same expression occurs 9 other times in ancient Greek literature and in each case, it unambiguously refers to sexual intercourse. This is also the unanimous interpretation by the early church. Although "woman" is probably a better translation than "wife", in theory, the word in Greek could mean "wife" (γυνή, *gune* - Thiselton 500) and is often translated that way (for example, the same word is translated as wife in 7:3, 4, 10, 11, 12, 14, 16, 27, 33, 39). However, usually when "wife" is intended, it is either paired with ἀνὴρ, *aner* (instead of ἄνθρωπος, *anthropos* [as in verse 1]) or has a possessive pronoun (his woman).

Is Paul telling the Corinthians "not to touch women;" or is this the Corinthians' opinion which Paul is now addressing?

The traditional interpretation

The traditional interpretation takes the entire paragraph as Paul's opinion. This means that Paul believes that it is best not to marry, but that singleness, accompanied by abstinence, is the best state to be in (cf. v. 8, 26). At the same time, he is a realist and knows that few can remain single because their sexual passions would drive them into immorality. For them it is better to marry than constantly be tempted sexually (6:12-20).

Problems with the traditional interpretation

There are blatant problems with this view:

1. First, Paul would hold a position contrary to the OT. Marriage is not simply a means to avoid immorality, but is an institution established by God who Himself declared, "It is not good for the man to be alone (i.e. to be unmarried)" (Gen. 2:18).

2. Secondly, Paul was not an ascetic but took a positive attitude toward marriage (9:19-23; 10:25-26, 29b-30; Ro. 14; Col. 2:20-21). In Ephesians 5:25-33 he uses marriage to illustrate the relationship between God and His people. In I Timothy 4:3 he says that forbidding people to marry is a sign of apostasy.

3. Thirdly, "it is good not to touch a woman" (i.e. "it is good not to have sex with a woman") would be a strange way for Paul to say, "It's good to be single."

4. Lastly, when the content and style of this quote is compared to I Corinthians 8:1 and 6, a similarity appears. In both passages the Corinthians had chosen a course of action that could be considered a "freedom" but was the more dangerous course of action. "The Corinthians' attitudes toward idol meat and marital intercourse are entirely consistent" (Thiselton, 499).

Other problems in the context itself will be discussed as they arise.

The better interpretation

The alternate view is that Paul is responding to questions received from the Corinthians in a letter written to him. One of the questions they had asked was related to their belief that "it was not good for a man to touch a woman." Paul is now responding to this question.

Evidently, the Corinthians were practicing a form of *asceticism in marriage*, including sexual abstinence, and Paul *disagrees* with them. He responds by telling them to have their own wives (i.e. find their sexual fulfillment in them - 7:2) and in verse 5 he commands them to "stop depriving one another" (of sex). Although abstinence for short periods of time is fine (7:5), it should never be the rule because of their lack of self-control (7:5). In Paul's opinion, a state of singleness is the best state to be in (7:7), but reality dictates that other factors need to be taken into consideration as well. This view seems to fit the best with all the details in the section itself.

7:2 But because of immoralities, each man is to have his own wife, and each woman is to have her own husband.

7:3 The husband must fulfill his duty to his wife, and likewise also the wife to her husband.

7:4 The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; and likewise also the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does.

In the traditional interpretation of verse 2, it is held that Paul, in a condescending way, is telling the Corinthians to get married because there is so much immorality in Corinth. In other words, if they can't control their sexual appetites, marriage is the second best option to celibacy. However, this doesn't seem to be the best view to take.

1. First, there is no other example of the idiom to "have his/her own wife/husband" as meaning "get married." Elsewhere, "to have a wife" usually means "to have her sexually" (Exo. 2:1; Deut. 28:30; Isa. 13:16), or to be married, or to be in a continuing sexual relationship (5:1; 7:29; Mk. 6:18; Jn. 4:18 - Fee, 278).

2. Secondly, if Paul were telling the Corinthians to marry, then "each man/woman" would be referring to everyone in the Christian community. This contradicts the rest of the chapter where Paul encourages singleness as well.

3. Thirdly, when Paul wants to say, "get married," he does so clearly (7:9).

It makes much more sense to see verses 2-4 as containing three balanced pairs of thought (Fee, 277), all addressing one subject - sexual fulfillment in marriage.

- each man is to have his own wife
- each woman is to have her own husband

- the husband must fulfill his duty to his wife
- the wife to her husband.

- The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does
- the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does.

The advantages to this view are as follows:

1. "But" in verse 2 is given its due force meaning "on the contrary" (Thiselton, 501); *contrary* to the Corinthians' belief that "it is good not to touch a woman" (7:1), Paul is giving a proper view of sex in marriage.
2. The idiom "to have one's own husband/wife" carries the usual meaning of "to have sexually." This is clarified in verses 3 and 4.
3. "Immoralities" (plural in *Greek*) refers to the various cases of immorality experienced by those in the church, not to "immorality" in general (Thiselton, 501).

In other words, in these verses Paul is commanding married couples to have sexual relations with each other in order to avoid seeking sexual fulfillment elsewhere.

Couples are to have each other sexually (7:2) because they are indebted to each other sexually (7:3). The wording literally means sex is "the payment which is due" and the present tense verb in *Greek* indicates that it is a continual obligation. Paul's emphasis, however, is not on "you owe me", but on "I owe you" (Fee, 280). The reason sex is viewed as something "due" is because in marriage one is under the authority of the other (7:4). In 6:12 the same verb "implies authority over something in such a way as to do with it as one sees fit" (Fee, 280).

For these reasons they should abandon their philosophy "it is not good to touch a woman" (i.e. "it's not good to have sex with your wife"); on the contrary, they should seek sexual fulfillment in marriage.

7:5 Stop depriving one another, except by agreement for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer, and come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.

Those who see verse 2 as Paul telling singles to get married so they can avoid immorality, have difficulty with verse 5. Why would Paul need to command couples not to deprive each other of sex if the reason they got married in the first place was to find sexual fulfillment?

However, this verse fits quite well with the view that Paul is addressing married couples who have been depriving each other of sexual fulfillment.

"Deprive" is a strong word for Paul to use and indicates taking from another what is rightfully theirs (i.e. illegal theft - Mk. 10:19, Thiselton, 506). Married couples should not deprive each other of sex because Satan may tempt them by using their own lack of self-control to seek sexual gratification with other people.

Although regular sexual interaction is to be the norm for married couples, there are times when abstinence is permitted. These times, however, are clearly defined. They must be times set aside by *mutual agreement*, times when an individual is seeking something spiritual such as a prolonged period of prayer, and times that are limited in duration lest temptation become overwhelming.

7:6 But this I say by way of concession, not of command.

The scope of "this" in verse 6 is an issue of debate. What exactly is Paul conceding to? Is 7:2-5 his concession? Verse 2 only? Verse 5? Is he speaking only of the latter part of verse 5? Or is he referring to what follows?

The best view is that although Paul disagrees with the Corinthians' philosophy of abstinence in marriage, he is conceding to the idea that there are times when abstinence is permissible (verse 5). Those who desire to abstain from sex for spiritual pursuits are allowed to if the above stipulations are met.

7:7 Yet I wish that all men were even as I myself am. However, each man has his own gift from God, one in this manner, and another in that.

Paul's wish is not simply that all were single as he was, but that they had the gift of singleness from God that freed them from the need of seeking sexual fulfillment, making it possible for them not to be married. This type of celibacy is different than merely suppressing sexual desire; it is a freedom that would allow them to put their energies into the things of God without the temptation to sin sexually (cf. Phil. 4:11)

In Matthew 19:11-12 Jesus said, "For there are eunuchs who were born that way from their mother's womb; and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men; and there are *also* eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the

kingdom of heaven. He who is able to accept *this*, let him accept *it*." In the previous context, Jesus had spoken of the binding nature of marriage, namely, that divorce was not allowed "for any cause at all" (Matt. 19:3) but only in the case of adultery (Matt. 19:9). This made marriage unattractive to the disciples who then concluded that it is best not to get married at all (Matt. 19:10). Jesus' reply is that not everyone can live with that conclusion, only those who are eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven. In verses 11 and 12, Jesus mentions three types of eunuchs: (1) there are those who are born eunuchs (they are incapable of reproduction), (2) those who were made eunuchs by men (Often those who served in places where there was the possibility of engaging in sexual relations with one in the king's harem would be castrated in order to avoid one of the king's wives from accidentally becoming pregnant with the child of another man), and (3) those who are eunuchs for the kingdom of God (those who can physically reproduce, but choose not to get married and have children in order to devote their time to the things of God). Only the last group can accept the disciples' conclusion "it is good not to marry at all." In essence, Paul has been saying the same thing.

Even though Paul saw the advantages of being single, he recognized that singleness with contentment is a gift from God. The Corinthians were urging celibacy among those who were married. But one person has a gift to be married (with the attending responsibilities), another a gift to be single, but both are gifts from God and one should not superimpose the same standard on everyone. "That is, one expresses his obedience to God within marriage, another by remaining unmarried" (Barrett, 158).

With these words Paul concludes his first section of chapter 7.

Note 1: This passage has been misconstrued by many for decades. The traditional interpretation sees celibacy as a superior spirituality and marriage only as means to suppress sinful sexual desires. Paul sees both marriage and singleness as gifts from God, though he does not hide the fact that he prefers his own state due to the gift he has (cf. a similar idea in 14:5, 18-19). By way of analogy, we may say that it is a good thing when someone desires to be a missionary, but by saying that, we are in no way demeaning the value of others in the church. Furthermore, if I were a missionary I may even say, "I wish they would become missionaries like me" but I would also know that that would depend on their calling and giftedness from God. The real message Paul is preaching is the proper view of sex within marriage, not the superiority of celibacy. Sex was created by God and is something

good to be enjoyed in the context of marriage. Sex is not a means of manipulation in marriage or something that should be abused. It is both a duty and a privilege to be shared by both spouses.

Furthermore, although there are advantages in celibacy, there is greater completeness in marriage (11:11 ff.), and Paul sees marriage as the norm. Singleness is a better position to be in as far as usefulness in the kingdom of heaven is concerned (Carson, *Matthew*, 419).

Note 2: Some see celibacy as a spiritual gift in the same category as tongues, the gift of teaching, prophecy, mercy, etc. because the word used for gift in 7:7 is *charisma* (χάρισμα), which in 12:4 is translated as "spiritual gift." However, this is unlikely for two reasons: First, Paul uses the word in a broad range of meaning even referring to the gift of salvation (Ro. 5:15-16; 6:23). Secondly, in the verse under discussion Paul says, "**each man has his own gift from God, one in this manner, and another in that.**" In the context, the gift "in this manner" refers to the gift of celibacy. The gift "in that [manner]" must then refer to the gift of being married and enjoying the sexual intimacy in it (Thiselton, 513). There is no other possible state to exist in - either one is given the gift of celibacy or the gift of marriage. This hardly constitutes a spiritual gift in the sense of being a manifestation of the Spirit for the common good of the church or the building up of the body as the other gifts are. But it must also be remembered that the parallel is not strictly celibacy versus marriage, but celibacy without frustration and marriage that cares for the responsibilities of caring and loving while living out the gospel (Thiselton. 513-514).

7:8 But I say to the unmarried and to widows that it is good for them if they remain even as I.

Paul mentions "the unmarried" and "widows." Widows are obviously women whose husbands have died. The "unmarried" may be singles who have never married, or may very well be referring to widowed men (i.e. widowers). First, (1) although Greek has a word for widowers, it was seldom used and is not found in any Greek literature in the period when the NT was written (i.e. the *koine* period). In fact, most ancient cultures didn't have a word for widowed men at all since men didn't face the same hardships as women who lost their husbands. Secondly, (2) Paul deals equally with husbands and wives 12 times in this passage and "widower/widow" would also be a natural pair. Thirdly, (3) verse 9 gives "the unmarried" permission

to remarry if they cannot control their passions. If "unmarried" referred to anyone who was single, including divorcees, this would contradict Jesus' restrictions on remarriage in Matthew 19 (i.e. He forbids remarriage unless the cause of divorce was adultery). Furthermore, Paul would contradict himself, for in Romans 7 he taught that someone is bound to their spouse as long as they live (Ro. 7:1-3; I Cor. 7:39).

In other words, it seems likely that "the unmarried" refers specifically to widowers, not to a general category of unmarried people.

Although I prefer this view, others have argued forcefully in another direction as well. Whatever Paul means by "unmarried," his advice is the same for everyone - if you aren't married, stay that way; if you were married, don't get married again. However, this does not apply if they lack self-control.

7:9 But if they do not have self-control, let them marry; for it is better to marry than to burn with passion.

Although it is best for widows and widowers to stay single, if they burn with passion, it is better to marry. The use of "burn" is clearly metaphorical, but it is difficult to tell if it means burn in the judgment or burn with passion, for both ideas fit well in the context and both uses can also be substantiated from other ancient sources. In II Corinthians 11:29 it is clearly a metaphor for inner lust and the same is probably true here.

"In this case, then, Paul is not so much offering marriage as the remedy for the sexual desire of 'enflamed youth,' which is the most common way of viewing the text, but as the alternative for those who are already consumed by that desire and are sinning" (Fee, 289).

7:10 But to the married I give instructions, not I, but the Lord, that the wife should not leave her husband

7:11 (but if she does leave, she must remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband should not divorce his wife.

Verses 10 and 11 are addressed to married couples where both partners are believers, for they are contrasted to "the rest" in verse 12 who are clearly believers married to unbelievers (mixed marriages).

When Paul contrasts his teaching to instructions from the Lord, he is not implying that his own teaching is of lesser authority. Even without a direct command, Paul still has authority (v. 25) because he has the Spirit of God (v. 40). The contrast is between things that the Lord had directly taught and what was revealed to Paul, not between God's opinion and Paul's own human opinion.

Divorce was common in the times of Paul and Jesus. In Jewish, Greek, and Roman law a divorce could take place for a number of reasons. In Greek and Roman law it could be freely initiated by either spouse. "To stay as you are" was not a conservative status quo ethic, but a radical and high view of marriage that the unbelieving did not hold (Thiselton, 423). Divorce is not allowed among Christians ("the wife should not leave her husband" - Mal. 2:16), but if for some reason it happens anyway ("if she does leave"), the individual must not remarry ("she must remain unmarried") or be reconciled to her husband. Jesus taught in Matthew 19:8-9 that to remarry under such circumstances would constitute adultery.

7:12 But to the rest I say, not the Lord, that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he must not divorce her.

7:13 And a woman who has an unbelieving husband, and he consents to live with her, she must not send her husband away.

Verses 12 and 13 speak of divorce, not mere separation as we think of it in our present day culture.

"The rest" signals that a new group of people are in view. In 7:10-11 Paul was talking about marriages where both spouses were Christians. He now addresses those cases where an unbeliever is married to a believer. Jesus did not specifically address this issue (since His ministry was almost exclusively cast within Judaism that did not deal with mixed marriages), but according to Paul the same principle applies to mixed marriages as well. Whether one is married to a believer or to an unbeliever, divorce should not be sought by a Christian. If the marriage is dissolved, it must be the unbeliever who acts. If the unbelieving spouse is willing to stay in the marriage, the believing spouse should allow them to do so.

Just as Paul did not allow divorce among believers, neither does he allow it among those in mixed marriages. The reason for this follows.

7:14 For the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her believing husband; for otherwise your children are unclean, but now they are holy.

This verse has raised a number of problems, for Paul does not usually use "sanctified" or "holy" apart from those in the believing community. In 1:30 he has already used "sanctify" to refer to salvation, but such a meaning here does not make sense. First, Paul would never come close to thinking that the salvation of one member in the household would carry over to an *unbelieving* partner. Secondly, verse 16 clearly shows that that is not what Paul had in mind.

The term "holy" does not necessarily mean "saved." Holy has two meanings. (1) It meant to be consecrated, set apart, or devoted for the service of God. (2) It also meant to be morally pure. In the former sense, it is applied to persons, places (e.g. Jerusalem), and things (e.g. the temple and its contents), almost without number in the OT. Because the nation of Israel was God's covenant community, it was called holy (i.e. it was set apart for God's service) even if some in the nation were morally corrupt or unbelieving.

The thought here is similar to Romans 11:16, "And if the first piece of dough be holy, the lump is also; and if the root be holy, the branches are too." In Romans 11 the first piece of dough and the roots are the patriarchs of the Jewish nation. The covenant that God made with them was also to their descendants (the lump and the branches). Because the patriarchs were holy, their descendants are too - but that does not mean that they were all saved automatically. When Paul wrote Romans, the Jews were unbelieving, nevertheless they belonged to God in a special sense, and Paul hoped that because of that they would eventually come to faith. This is similar to what Paul has in mind here. Because the unbeliever is married to and has become one with a believer, they belong to God in a special sense and the potential of their coming to faith is greater. This is true of the children as well.

7:15 Yet if the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave; the brother or the sister is not under bondage in such cases, but God has called us to peace.

Paul follows the normal pattern of telling believers to stay as they are. The exception is if an unbeliever leaves (divorces them), the believer is not under obligation to stay married.

Notice that this verse says nothing about being able to get remarried. The Bible teaches that one is bound to the marriage as long as the spouse *lives* (v. 11, Ro. 7:1-3). Paul is not saying that if someone divorces them they are no longer bound to the marriage covenant and are free to re-marry; rather, he is simply telling them that if the unbeliever divorces them, they are free from *trying to maintain* the marriage.

It is difficult to know what Paul means by "God has called us to peace." Is the call to peace referring to the dissolution of the marriage or to its preservation (vv. 12-14)? In other words, is Paul returning to the original thought about staying together in marriage, or is he concluding the thought about separation? If divorce is in view, the thought would be that God is calling us to peace so don't contest the spouse's desire to get a divorce. That is, peace would be impossible if the unbeliever were forced to live with the believer. Separation should be allowed to avoid as much hostility as possible. The problem with this view is that "but" (*de - δε* in Greek) usually has either an adversative ("but") or consecutive ("and") force, but neither makes sense if Paul is referring to divorce. It is probably better to see "the call to peace" as a call to stay married and to try to maintain peace in the marriage even though the marriage is difficult. In other words, they are to stay as they are.

Note: In all fairness, it should be said that others see this as saying that the believer is not under any restrictions of marriage whatsoever and so the believer is free to remarry after a divorce. Although this seems contrary to the general tenor of the passage (which is against remarriage) and other places in scripture (v. 11, Ro. 7:1-3), it is not an impossible interpretation.

7:16 For how do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife?

Verse 16 contains the final reason for maintaining a mixed marriage. This verse also has two different interpretations. Is Paul saying that they should allow their unbelieving spouse to leave because they have no way of knowing if they would be saved by staying together? Or is he saying that they should try to stay together because through their witness they may be saved?

If God's call to peace is a reason to maintain the marriage (v. 15), then it is more likely that Paul is telling them another reason to stay together is that by doing so their spouse might be saved (cf. I Pet. 3:1-2).

Of course when Paul speaks of saving one's spouse, he means being the tool that God uses to lead them to Christ. This same wording is also used by Paul in 9:22 and Romans 11:14.

7:17 Only, as the Lord has assigned to each one, as God has called each, in this manner let him walk. And so I direct in all the churches.

From 7:1 we have observed that the Corinthians viewed abstinence and celibacy as being "spiritual" and so they sought to change their current state of marriage in order to practice these beliefs. However, Paul argues that God's call for them in Christ (1:9) "transcends such settings so as to make them essentially irrelevant. That is, the call to Christ has created such change in one's essential relationship (with God) that one does not need to seek change in other relationships (with people)" (Fee, 307).

Verse 17 begins with "nevertheless" ("only" in the NASB) which ties it to verse 15 (Barrett, 167). In other words, the brother or sister is not bound to their spouse in cases where their spouse leaves, but (nevertheless) a believer should remain in the place where God has called them when he/she was saved. Paul's concern is not that we keep our social setting but that we realize that whatever setting we find ourselves in is the setting that God wants us to live out our Christian life (vv. 18, 20, 21, 22, 24). It is the condition in which a man is in when he is called, not the vocation he is called to that Paul is emphasizing (Barrett, 168). The various social settings are something that God "assigned" to us when we were called to salvation. That doesn't mean that the social setting we were saved in will never change or that we are to try to stay in that setting, but that the situation we are in is set apart by God for us. In the present context, it means being married. At the same time, Paul is not trying to make this a law but simply to put our life situation into the proper perspective.

- "As God has called" defines what Paul means through the rest of the passage. It refers to our conversion (1:9 cf. 1:24).

- "And so I direct in all the churches" and similar expressions are used frequently in I Corinthians by Paul (4:17; 11:16; 14:33; 16:1) and are his way of reminding them that their theology is off, not his (Fee, 311).

Paul moves on in the verses that follow to illustrate what he has just explained.

7:18 Was any man called when he was already circumcised? He is not to become uncircumcised. Has anyone been called in uncircumcision? He is not to be circumcised.

7:19 Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but what matters is the keeping of the commandments of God.

7:20 Each man must remain in that condition in which he was called.

Having stated that the believer is to see their calling as something that includes their life setting, he moves into other examples outside of marriage to illustrate and expand his point.

Paul uses the words "circumcision" and "uncircumcision" as metaphors for Jew and gentile (cf. Ro. 15:8; Gal. 2:12; Phil. 3:2-3; Col. 4:11, etc.), not of the literal surgical procedure. This is also obvious by the comment "He is not to become uncircumcised", which was a physical impossibility in those days. In essence, he means a Jew shouldn't try to become a gentile or visa-versa.

To the Jew, circumcision meant everything, for it was a symbol of pride demonstrating that one was a descendant of Abraham (Gen. 17:14) and a sign that one would be submissive to the law (Lev. 12:3; cf. Gal. 5:3). It was a commandment of God found in the OT. But Paul's point is that anything that requires more than belief in the gospel (i.e. to change and revert to being a Jew in order to become "spiritual") negates the gospel, for it attaches spirituality to something other than Christ. The same principle applies to every other area of life as well. To assume that a change in life will improve our spiritual condition is to destroy the gospel, for it puts life's circumstances on an equal plane with the saving work of Christ. What matters is that we keep the commands of God wherever we are.

When Paul says to remain "in the condition in which he was called" he is not telling Christians to stay in the faith (as some see it). Rather, he is repeating what he has already said in verse 17; we are not only called to be saved, but our call to

salvation includes our walk in the circumstances we are currently in, so we should not spend our time trying to change them (cf. Phil 4:11-13; II Tim. 6:8; II Cor. 12:10).

7:21 Were you called while a slave? Do not worry about it; but if you are able also to become free, rather do that.

7:22 For he who was called in the Lord while a slave, is the Lord's freedman; likewise he who was called while free, is Christ's slave.

Paul continues to illustrate "how a man is not called to a new occupation; his old occupation is given new significance" (Barrett, 170). The second illustration in verse 21 parallels the first, only this time it has to do with slavery and freedom.

Fee does an excellent job of outlining these verses as follows:

A. First illustration: circumcision (18-20)

1. To the circumcised: do not change (18a)
2. To the uncircumcised: do not change (18b)
 - Reason: neither counts (19)
 - Conclusion: stay in your calling (20)

B. Second illustration: slavery (21-24)

1. To the slave: do not be concerned (21a)
 - Exception: If granted make use of your freedom (22a)
 - Reason: To a slave: one is free in Christ (22a)
 - To a free person: one is Christ's slave (22b)
 - additional theological reason (23)
 - Conclusion: stay in your calling (24)

In this case Paul's argument takes a twist. The general principle still applies "stay as you are when you are called to salvation," however, in verse 21 he does not say to the slave "stay as you are" but "do not worry about it." This is because a slave, unlike a married person or someone who was uncircumcised, could not choose to change their status even if they wanted to. But this in itself becomes a powerful way of showing what Paul is really trying to say: don't let life be a concern to you. Change may occur, but whether it does or does not, it shouldn't be of any concern for "your calling in Christ eclipses such conditions, and thereby transforms them into situations where you may live out your Christian 'calling'" (Fee, 316).

Verse 22 gives the reason (γάρ - gar) for slaves (or, for that matter, anyone) not to be stressed about their situation. Slavery or freedom doesn't mean a thing, for we are joined to Christ. Even though a slave may still be forced to serve another, in Christ he is free. In the same way, those who are free are in reality servants of Christ. In both cases, Christ, not the worldly situation, determines one's position.

Verse 23 takes the same point one step further.

7:23 You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men.

Being redeemed, or purchased by Christ has a twofold effect; those in Christ are free from the bondage of the world, sin, and self, but they also become the slave of Christ Himself. Because this is true of those who were socially slaves and those who were socially free, neither had the right to willfully enslave themselves to another Master, for Christ was the only one to whom they were to follow.

Verse 24 concludes with the theme of this paragraph: stay as you are.

7:24 Brethren, each one is to remain with God in that condition in which he was called.

This also concludes the thought begun in verse 1 that some were contemplating abandoning both the sexual responsibilities to their spouse and were even contemplating divorce in order to achieve a state of celibacy which they considered a higher spiritual status.

7:25 Now concerning virgins I have no command of the Lord, but I give an opinion as one who by the mercy of the Lord is trustworthy.

Verses 25-40 introduce a new subject signaled by the second "now concerning" (- cf. 7:1 - an expression that Paul uses 6 times in the epistle and usually introduces a change in subject - Thiselton, 567).

The theme of the rest of the chapter deals with whether or not virgins should marry. Virgins form a new group in that they are not yet married (see Thiselton pp. 568-571 who mentions 6 different views).

Once again, this passage, like so many in this book, has various interpretations. The traditional view is that Paul is speaking of a father who is undecided about whether he should give his virgin daughter in marriage. A major problem with this, however, is that the words "father," "daughter," or even "guardian" never appear in the text. Furthermore, there is nothing that even remotely suggests that Paul is addressing this issue.

It seems better to see this as Paul addressing people who were contemplating marriage but were discouraged from doing so due to the Corinthians' view of celibacy (see notes on 7:1). It is also possible that he is simply anticipating that some may wonder if they should get married at all after hearing Paul's exhortation to "remain as you are." His comments are primarily from the man's point of view since in Roman culture they were the ones who took the initiative in such matters.

Although Jesus did not address this specific issue, Paul, who was guided by the Holy Spirit and whose words are part of the inspired NT, writes "his" opinion which is also trustworthy.

7:26 I think then that this is good in view of the present distress that it is good for a man to remain as he is.

Paul's comments may not hold true in every case but are tied to "the present distress" - i.e. specific hardships (severe pressures) the church was facing as he wrote. What that distress was is unknown although it could have been persecution or something else that would have made marriage difficult. In any case, Paul thinks the best course of action is to remain as they are.

7:27 Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be released. Are you released from a wife? Do not seek a wife.

Based on the distress that the church was facing, Paul repeats his theme - stay as you are.

In the traditional view, Paul is addressing two groups of people - the married and the single and is repeating what he has already stated. In other words, this view sees verse 27 as meaning, "If you are married don't get a divorce and if you

are divorced don't get married." This view is good in that the same language is used in 7:39 and Romans 7:2.

However, a weakness of this view is that "released" is never used for divorce but of releasing someone from a contract. This makes "release from an obligation" a better meaning.

In Greek the word *gune* (γυνή) is the standard word for "wife" and is translated as such through most of the passage but may be also translated as "woman" as it is in 7:1 and 7:34 (also Matt. 9:20, 22; 15:22, 28; Mk. 14:3). In this case Paul would not simply be repeating himself (cf. 7:11) but would be *addressing those who were engaged or committed to a woman to be married*. If that was what Paul meant, "released" would mean to be freed from that promise, not "divorced." This fits well with the thought "Do not seek a wife."

In other words, it is more probable that Paul is not talking to those who are divorced but to those seeking mates, some of whom have already obligated themselves to marriage (see Thiselton, 577 for more reasons). In this case what he would be saying is, "if you have no commitment (if you are "released from a woman") then do not seek a wife."

To paraphrase:

If you are engaged to a woman, don't seek to break the engagement.
If you are not engaged, don't seek a wife.

7:28 But if you marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned. Yet such will have trouble in this life, and I am trying to spare you.

If the second view is correct (that Paul is speaking of those who are engaged), then verse 28 would be clarifying that Paul's advice is pastoral in nature, not law. "If you do decide to marry or a virgin woman marries, neither has sinned."

Paul suggests that they remain single because he realizes that marriage will bring additional concerns to an already troubled time. He wants to spare people from unnecessary anxiety.

7:29 But this I say, brethren, the time has been shortened, so that from now on those who have wives should be as though they had none;

7:30 and those who weep, as though they did not weep; and those who rejoice, as though they did not rejoice; and those who buy, as though they did not possess;

7:31 and those who use the world, as though they did not make full use of it; for the form of this world is passing away.

Verses 29-31 explain what Paul has just said; life should be lived with the understanding that the world is passing away. This is the factor that determines what decisions we make.

In verse 29 he says the time has been shortened. This could mean that the time that Christians have to serve Christ is shortened (Eph. 5:15-16; Col. 4:5) so they should use every opportunity well. Or it could mean that since Christ has already come, died, and risen from the dead, the time of salvation is drawing near so we should live in light of that. In either case, those who can see the reality that the future is near (or that their time here is limited) live in a radically different way than those who do not.

Verse 30 gives us a clue about what Paul means in the verses that follow. Even though the believer may have times of joy and sorrow, or may purchase things, he/she should not live as if that was all that there was to life. These things should not be viewed as something to put our trust in, or to base our decisions upon, or influence our life. For "the world is passing away" and all that is in it will cease to exist. This should be the Christian's view of reality. If someone really believes this, he will live in a way that is radically different from the rest of humanity.

"The Christian is marked by eternity; therefore he or she is not under the dominating power of these things that dictate the existence of others" (Fee, 341).

7:32(a) But I want you to be free from concern.

Traditionally, verse 32 and following have been interpreted as the reason why Paul encourages singleness; namely, because a single is free from the extra responsibilities in marriage. But verse 32a is a conclusion to the preceding paragraph and the lead-in for the verses that follow.

- In verses 21-24 Paul had been arguing to live life free from the concerns of this present age. He encouraged the believer to look at life through his position in Christ and to remain in the condition in which he had come to Christ.
- In verses 29-31 Paul's concern had to do with living in the present age in light of the future reality to come. The future should determine how we view our present situation. "Those whose whole life is wrapped up in, for example, marriage or commerce, in the world where all possessions and relationships are passing away, can scarcely hope to avoid anxiety" (Barrett, 178; Matt. 6:25-34; I Pet. 5:7; Phil. 4:11), yet Paul wants them to be free from anxiety.
- "It is moreover the essence of Paul's gospel that man no longer needs to feel anxiety before God. Justified by faith he has peace with God (Ro. 5:1), and Paul's criticism of Judaism and of Judaizing Christianity is that they lead to bondage and fear (e.g. Ro. 8:15); men engage in good works and religious practices because they are not confident of God's grace, but now that he has proved God's love in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us, such anxious religiosity is out of place, and is indeed a slight upon God's grace" (Barrett, 179).

The next sentence therefore appears to be anything but a praise of unmarried life.

7:32(b) One who is unmarried is concerned about the things of the Lord, how he may please the Lord;

7:33 but one who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how he may please his wife,

7:34(a) and his interests are divided.

Traditionally, the verb "concerned" in verse 32(b) is taken in a positive light, while the same verb in verse 33 is taken to be something negative. In other words, these verses are taken to mean that the unmarried man can concentrate on the things of God while the married man is bogged down with the things of the world. This makes Paul appear to be giving a reason why celibacy is superior to marriage.

However, the great weakness of this view is that we must believe that the same word, in two nearly identical sentences, has opposite meanings.

To state it differently, in the traditional view, "concern" is taken to be a good thing in the first sentence (it is good to be concerned about the things of the Lord). In the second sentence it is viewed as a bad thing (it is bad to be concerned about the things of the world). But it is better to take both comments in the same sense - negatively. "Concern" is bad. Period.

The married and unmarried are in different life circumstances but they are both trying to do what is right. It is good to please the Lord. It is also good to please your wife. But to do either with anxiety is wrong. Paul wants all Christians whether they are married or not to live without anxiety (concern).

The problem that some see with this view is that it sounds like Paul is telling people that it is wrong to be concerned about how they please the Lord. But it must be remembered that the issue is about anxiety, not a healthy desire to please God. Like the Jews who tried to please God through performance and meritorious good works, those in Corinth were trying to please God by living an ascetic lifestyle. Many had anxiety that stemmed from their view of celibacy (see notes on 7:1). Those that were not gifted with the ability to be single felt under pressure not to get married (7:1-7). Those who were married felt compelled to abstain from physical relationships to reach a higher spiritual plateau. But this only resulted in a lack of self-control and immorality, as well as a lack of sexual fulfillment in marriage (see discussion under 7:1-7). Paul tells them not to be anxious about how they can please God, for God has already accepted them as they are.

Paul still prefers celibacy over married life, for the married man has divided interests (33), however nobody needs to be anxious over the fact that he is married and is trying to please his wife. Whatever state God called them in is fine and they need not be anxious about changing it (see 7:13ff.).

7:34b The woman who is unmarried, and the virgin, is concerned about the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and spirit; but one who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how she may please her husband.

Verse 34b follows the same basic pattern as 32b, and 33 only addresses women.

- A. **The woman who is unmarried, and the virgin is concerned about the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and spirit**
- B. **but one who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how she may please her husband.**

If the interpretation of verses 32 and 33 is correct, then "that she may be holy both in body and spirit" would add support to the idea that the women were involved in asceticism in which they refrained from any sexual activity. They were anxious about how to stay morally pure though they were not gifted with singleness.

All Christians should strive to be holy in both spirit and body but these women evidently considered abstinence to be a higher spiritual level and focused on the purification of the body as a meritorious act. Anxiety resulted from the stress caused of such a lifestyle. See the comments on verses 32b and 33 for further explanation.

7:35 This I say for your own benefit; not to put a restraint upon you, but to promote what is appropriate and to secure undistracted devotion to the Lord.

The reason for Paul's instruction in 29-35 is given: it is for our benefit, so that we may do what is appropriate and secure devotion to the Lord.

This verse also provides a transition into the last paragraph in the chapter.

The believer is to live in light of the future and not be anxious about his/her present condition - whether single or married. The ascetic lifestyle was an attempt to restrain behavior contrary to giftedness (v. 7). This was contrary to God's purposes. A celibate lifestyle is only "appropriate" for those who are gifted in that way, but inappropriate for those who are not. In fact, abstinence in marriage hinders the spiritual growth of a married person. Paul is not trying to squelch a desire to please God but wants our devotion to be appropriate. The single lifestyle is less distracted than that of a married person and is still preferred, but is in no way a means to reach a higher spiritual status before God.

The traditional view sees Paul as saying that celibacy is appropriate for undistracted devotion to God, but Paul has not said that. Rather, he has argued that celibacy has advantages, considering the times in which we live. What is appropriate is determined by your present state and your giftedness. Married people can have unhindered devotion as well. What matters is that you are not distracted by trying to implement unnecessary change and become anxious about it instead of focusing all your attention on the Lord.

7:36 But if any man thinks that he is acting unbecomingly toward his virgin daughter, if she is past her youth, and if it must be so, let him do what he wishes, he does not sin; let her marry.

The NASB, NIV, and other versions interject words that are not in the original text in an effort to bring clarity (I assume). In reality, the word "daughter" does not appear at all in this passage and most twentieth century scholars do not believe that it is implied (Thiselton, 596).

It is better to see this as comments to engaged couples: "But if any man thinks that he is acting unbecomingly toward his fiancée, if she is past her youth, and if it must be so, let him do what he wishes, he does not sin;" The words that follow ("Let her marry"), however, pose a difficulty for this view. Even with the difficulty, this still seems to be the view that has the most going for it (see difficulties this also poses for other views - Fee).

7:37 But he who stands firm in his heart, being under no constraint, but has authority over his own will, and has decided this in his own heart, to keep his own virgin daughter, he will do well.

7:38 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.

7:39 A wife is bound as long as her husband lives; but if her husband is dead, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord.

These words appear to conclude sections 1-24 and 25-38. This verse harmonizes with Paul's understanding of divorce and remarriage. In verses 10 and 13 he urged a woman not to divorce, but if she did she was not permitted to remarry. (see appendix 3)

The marriage bond is in effect as long as both partners live. Only death dissolves the marriage. In that case the widow is free to remarry. But if they do their new spouse should be a believer (in the Lord) (see II Cor. 6:14-17).

7:40 But in my opinion she is happier if she remains as she is; and I think that I also have the Spirit of God.

In Paul's opinion it is best if the widow simply remains as she is and not remarry at all. Although this is not a command, Paul had spiritual wisdom which meant that he had the help of the Holy Spirit in making such judgments.

CONCLUSION:

Paul is not teaching that singleness is better than marriage or that marriage is better than singleness. Marriage is still the norm, but under the distress the believers were facing, it would be better for them to remain single. Marriage is not always the best option. He is also clear that his suggestions are not commands. His conclusions are drawn from the current situation the believers were in. In a different setting and under other circumstances, he may have said the opposite.