Understanding 1 Corinthians chapter 7

In this chapter, Paul is not handing out a new set of rules for every possible marital situation. He's demonstrating how to think through complex relationship dynamics in light of the gospel and the essentials of Jesus' teaching. They don't need some expert to uncover hidden truths or some revolutionary new teaching to solve their problems. They need to faithfully understand and apply the basic principles they have already been taught. And we need to learn to do the same.

Verse 35 expresses the heart of the whole chapter: "I say this for your own benefit, not to lay any restraint upon you, but to promote ***good order*** and to secure your undivided ***devotion to the Lord***." Paul's concern is for the order and stability of the whole church and its witness in the world. He wants them to honor God's design for ordering their homes and the church so they can stand strong together in the gospel, avoid unnecessary disruption and division, and give themselves wholeheartedly to serving the Lord.

What's Happening?

The churches in Corinth met in private homes, often hosted by a married couple with enough space to gather. Their meetings centered around a shared meal remembering Jesus, followed by participation of each household in things like Scripture reading, teaching, prayer and singing. Marriage and family life were therefore closely connected and integrated into the life and ministry of the church.

But people came to Christ in all kinds of circumstances, raising practical questions about marriage and relationships. Some were engaged to unbelievers, some were already married to unbelieving spouses, and some had been widowed and were considering remarriage. Others were promoting the idea that avoiding marriage and sex altogether was a more spiritually mature way to live. These different views were creating debate and division in the church. *The issue is bigger than individual marriage decisions. The stability of marriages and households affect the stability of the church family, its ability to function and its witness in the city.*

What has God done through Jesus Christ, and who are we, now that we trust in Jesus?

Paul has already reminded them in chapters 5–6, and he reinforces it again in 1 Corinthians 7:23: "You were bought with a price." Jesus, in his great love for us, bought us with his own blood. We are no longer who we used to be. ***We are a new, holy family, united in Christ and called to reflect the goodness and beauty of God in the world.*** All Paul wants for the church in Corinth, and all Jesus wants for us, is that we live consistently with who we already are in Christ.

What basic principles were they already given to guide them in living the gospel way of life?

There are really two core principles underlying Paul's teaching in this chapter:

> *Principle 1: Honour God's design for marriage relationships and household order.*

From the beginning, Paul taught the Corinthians the basics of God's design for marriage and household relationships: marriage as a lifelong, one-flesh union (Eph. 5:31); both husband and wife living under Christ's lordship (Eph. 5:21); husbands loving sacrificially as Christ loves the church (Eph. 5:25); and wives respecting and submitting to their husbands reflecting Christ's humility and submission (Eph. 5:22, 33). These principles are rooted in the faithfulness, commitment and love of Jesus. They are about living under Christ's authority, working together as one, and standing firm against the forces that seek to divide and distort.

Principle 2: Serve God faithfully in whatever circumstances you find yourself in.

In verses 17–24, Paul reinforces a core principle for all the churches: honor Christ and serve God faithfully in the circumstances in which he has called you. Our circumstances don't need to change for us to live faithfully as followers of Jesus. Whether married, single, widowed or even enslaved, our first priority is to live under Christ's lordship and obey his commands. If God provides an opportunity to change our circumstances legitimately, that's fine. But don't assume you need to get into or out of a relationship to honor Jesus. Focus on serving him faithfully right where you are.

What does faithfulness to these principles look like in our specific situation?

Paul gives us a good example of doing theology in culture by applying the principles of Christ to specific situations. He offers different responses depending on people's circumstances and responsibilities, recognizing that one identical response won't fit everyone. Sometimes he appeals directly to an established teaching of Jesus ("Not I, but the Lord," v. 10); other times, he offers an application that is consistent with the established principles to a situation not directly addressed by Jesus ("I, not the Lord," v. 12).

Paul's application to different relationship situations in the Corinthian church

1. Married couples (vv. 2–5, 10–11)

- Sexual intimacy is good, mutual and other-centred.
- Marriage is a lifelong commitment. Don't abandon it.
- If separation occurs, remain unmarried or be reconciled.

2. Those who are single (vv. 6–9)

- Singleness is a legitimate calling, not a requirement for spiritual maturity.
- Marriage is also good. Neither makes you more acceptable to God.
- Serve God faithfully in whatever situation you are in.

3. Married to an unbeliever (vv. 12–16)

- If your unbelieving spouse is willing to stay, don't leave.
- Honour the marriage covenant and avoid unnecessary division.

- If they choose to leave, don't prevent them. You are not enslaved to the marriage.

4. Those engaged to be married (vv. 25–38)

- Remaining single may be advantageous given the present difficulties.
- Getting married is not a sin.
- Consider your circumstances and your freedom to serve the Lord.

5. Widows (vv. 39–40)

- Free to remarry, provided the prospective husband belongs to the Lord.
- Remaining single may be preferable, but it is not a command.

Discuss in Community:

1. What's the difference between applying the principles of Christ to everyday life situations vs making and keeping rules for every possible situation?

2. How can you honor God's design for marriage and household relationships, and serve Christ faithfully in your own particular situation? What would applying the main principles look like in your married, single, or widowed life?

3. Are there circumstances or relationships in your life that you have been tempted to see as obstacles to serving God? What might it look like to honor him right where you are?
4. Based on Paul's example, what does it look like to do theology in culture and apply the basic principles of Christ to complex, real-life situations? What would that process involve?

5. Today, we often separate family life from the ministry and mission of the church. Marriage becomes something private, with churches offering occasional support or programs rather than intentionally integrating couples and households into the life and mission of the church. As a result, we can miss the opportunity to develop strong, gospel-shaped marriages, equip households to serve together, and help couples see their marriage as part of something much bigger than their own relationship.

   How might we reshape the life and ministry of our church so that marriages and households become an integral part of its discipleship, community life and mission in the world?