

WHERE WE ARE HEADED

We could spend months in 1 Corinthians 7! But we are going to only spend one more week in this rich passage. That means we have to be selective, and probably not touch on some of the questions raised by what Paul writes. So, what will we focus on? His "big idea."

In chapter 7, Paul is pushing against the idea of some in the Corinthian community that one's social standing, one's marital status, or one's life circumstances is *determinative* with regard to living "spiritual." But Paul insists that such is not the case, and we will turn our attention to where he drives that idea home.

WALKING THROUGH THE DISCUSSION

What is in view in the opening questions? It is an attempt to simply bring to the surface the reality that we all do tend to think that certain life situations are more conducive to "spirituality" than others. And that issue is at the heart of Paul's concern in this section.

Fundamentally, Paul is *not* writing about singleness; he is writing to the Corinthians about how spiritual living was being experienced and singleness (and marriage) was the setting for the discussion. He does not answer all our questions about either singleness or marriage, but does address the core thinking about living for Christ where we are.

Before we turn attention to the specific portion of 7:17-40 that we will be focusing on, it might be helpful to at least touch on some of the issues that might arise as your group thinks about and discusses the passage. So . . .

Who are the "virgins" ("betrothed") in this passage? Given the way Paul speaks about them, it would seem that he is addressing those who are promised in marriage (engaged) but not yet married.

Why is he addressing them? Because given the teaching in Corinth that it would be "more spiritual" to *not* engage in any sexual intimacy, the betrothed were left questioning whether they should proceed or not.

What is his basic advice? He offers no command; he opens the way for those who intend to marry to do so, if they believe they should. Neither marrying nor not marrying is sinful or less "spiritual."

Doesn't Paul say that the married are "anxious" about things other than the Lord? Paul notes the "caring" (the word translated by some as "anxious") that the married should rightly have for their spouses and points out that the unmarried do not share such concerns. He is not privileging one over the other, but offering pastoral insights into the reality of life so that those who are considering making a decision about marriage understand what they are entering into.

Doesn't Paul say that those who are married should live like they are not? It is true that Paul uses that language, but we must listen to what he means by that. Clearly, given what we have already learned in 7:1-5, Paul would not say those who are married should live like they are not married. He is insisting that such things like marriage, or buying

things, or interacting with this world *are not the things that define us* even though we live in such settings.

Of course you should touch on these things if questions come up, but don't turn the discussion into an exploration of singleness, and marriage, and divorce and remarriage—those are not the core of Paul's concern but the setting for where the Corinthians are struggling with what matters most.

When you get to 7:17-24 it is important to note the refrain that Paul repeats. Three times, in similar words, he makes the same point (7:17, 20, 24). The point? Live where you are! You do not have to change your status or standing in order to live the kind of spiritual life that Jesus wants for you.

He illustrates this by turning his attention to both circumcision and slavery. (And, take note, he does not say all that could or all that he might have about either of those topics!)

With regard to circumcision, some clearly would have thought there was some real "spiritual benefit" to being Jewish (and, thus, circumcised). On the opposite end of the spectrum, some who had been Jews even underwent surgery to have their circumcision reversed, thinking that getting out from under that identifying mark was part of the path to greater spirituality. But Paul underscores the idea that with regard to vital life in Christ, circumcision counts for nothing.

When he turns to the topic of slavery, he does not state the "nothingness" of the condition in quite the same way. He is willing to say that if a slave has the opportunity to avail himself or herself of freedom, then it would be fine to do so. But apart from that provision, Paul is quite clear that being slave or free has little real impact on one's "spirituality." Thus, he can say "Do not be concerned about it" (7:21).

Notice carefully how he wraps up the discussion of the slave versus free state; whether a slave or a free man, both belong to Christ, both are identified with Christ, both should find their identity in Him. That is at the heart of what Paul is underscoring.

You can trace this idea throughout the whole chapter:

- 6:19-20: You were bought to be Christ's. That defines you.
- 7:7: You were gifted to live the life you are in. Live there.
- 7:17: Each one should live the life Jesus gave.
- 7:24: Where you are living, be *there* with the Lord.

Clearly there is a great deal more that could be explored out of this chapter (and this week's and last week's devotional guides may be of help to those who wish to explore this chapter more), but this theme of thoughtfully and intentionally living with Christ where we are seems to be the over-riding message of this chapter.

What can be of greatest help to us as we reflect on this chapter? Perhaps it can be stated as simply as this: It is our life in Christ that defines us and not the life we find ourselves in. The life we find ourselves in is the setting we are given to live out our life in Christ!

We will be
looking at 1
Corinthians
7:17-24

INITIAL THOUGHTS

Rank the following people in order based on your perception as to how easy it would be for them to live “spiritually”:

College student	Stay-home mom with two kids	Pastor
Single working adult	Married couple	Retired banker

What influences how you ended up ranking them?

REFLECTING ON THE TEXT

Although 1 Corinthians 7:25-40 mentions “virgins” (those who are unmarried, single), singleness is not the issue. Living “spiritual” is the issue in view. And to help us stay on target, we will concentrate on 7:17-24.

What “refrain” is echoed repeatedly in these few verses?

How does that repetition call your attention to what Paul is most concerned about?

How do you understand the point he is making in speaking about circumcision? How is that point picked up and restated when he writes about slavery and freedom?

Why would Paul insist that circumcision doesn’t count for anything?

Why would Paul argue that whether one is a slave or not that it is not something to be concerned with?

BUILDING BRIDGES INTO LIFE

In Corinth, some insisted that certain life situations were inherently more conducive to “being spiritual.” And the way that was spun, some were crippled in thinking about marriage and singleness fearing they would end up making a “less spiritual” choice. Where have you felt that kind of tension?

How can Paul’s illustrations in 7:17-24 help you process how you will approach such decisions?

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