



AN IMPERFECT LOCAL CHURCH
A Study in 1 Corinthians
TEACHER – Lesson 12

GENERAL OUTLINE

1 Corinthians 7:1-11:16, Questions asked about marriage, idols & head coverings

OUTLINE: Lesson 12

1 Corinthians 7:17-40, Various questions about being single

7:17-24 Stay as you are

7:25-40 Questions about remaining single

7:25-28 Concerning “virgins”

7:29-35 The time is short

7:36-40 Freedom to choose

As a bridge from the previous teachings about being married to the next section about being single Paul presents two examples (circumcision and slavery) to illustrate the basic principle of remaining in the same situation as when called. Obviously, this idea is to be understood in context. There are many things in a person’s life that one is called to abandon when converted to Christ, but social status is not one of them.

After this statement of principle, Paul turns to questions asked by single Christians who wondered if singleness not only presented some practical advantages for Christians but might even be mandatory for spiritual reasons. So Paul discusses at length the spiritual pros and cons of remaining single but decisively leaves the decision to the individual. Neither getting married nor remaining single is a spiritual obligation or command.

DISCUSSION

1 Corinthians 7:17-24, Stay as you are

Paul is still addressing Corinthian questions about being married or single, but he uses two seemingly unrelated examples to convey his message. Illustrations in which the subject is not connected to the original topic can sometimes be useful in overcoming preconceived ideas. In this case, circumcision and slavery were not directly related to the subject of marriage, but they served to demonstrate a common principle.

Note: Concerning “becoming uncircumcised,” there is evidence indicating that some Jewish men sought a surgical procedure that reversed, or at least disguised, the circumcision they had received at birth (e.g., 1 Maccabees 1:14-15).

- 1. Identify all the times in chapter 7 that Paul says to “remain” in one’s present situation. (Note: He doesn’t always use the word “remain,” even though the idea is present.) Which “situations” are mentioned and for which ones does Paul offer (but not command) an alternative to the status quo?**

*Verse 8: Unmarried and widows, but could marry

Verses 10, 12-13: Married should remain married (w/o remain) – “not to depart... not divorce”

*Verse 11: Unmarried, but reconciliation is permitted

Verse 17: “Each one” as far as social status is concerned (w/o remain) – “so let him walk”

Verse 18: The circumcised.

Verse 20: “Each one” as far as social status is concerned

*Verse 21: Slave could accept freedom if the opportunity was presented, but shouldn’t be overly concerned about being a slave (w/o remain) – “Do not be concerned”

Verse 24: Each one

*Verses 26-28: Married and single, but single could marry if they wanted to

*Verse 40: Widows, but marriage “in the Lord” was an option

An * indicates an option was permitted. The unmarried could marry and a slave could seek freedom.

- 2. How did one’s social situation or status (e.g., married, single, circumcised, slave, etc.) affect one’s spiritual condition? See also: Galatians 3:27-28; Philippians 4:11-13.**

One’s spiritual condition (i.e., salvation) did not depend on social status matters. The passages in Galatians and Philippians present the same idea. Even gender was irrelevant in one’s relationship with God. Each group would encounter practical opportunities and obstacles as they tried to live godly lives, but their status in no way separated them from God.

- 3. If such things as those mentioned above were not important in one’s relationship with God, what two things does Paul identify in this passage as being highly important?**

1. Keeping the commandments of God (v. 19).

2. Being “bought at a price” (i.e., the blood of Christ) (v. 23).

- 4. For which ethnic or religious group might verse 19 have been the most shocking or disturbing and why?**

The Jews. They considered circumcision to be a “commandment of God” and would have been shocked when the apostle said it was not. This supports a clear distinction between the OT commands and what is expected of Christians living under the NT.

Note: In Galatians and elsewhere (e.g., Acts 15) we find Jewish Christians saying that Gentile converts should be circumcised. There may have been some in Corinth who thought that way, but it doesn’t seem to be the context for the discussion in Corinth as it was in Galatia.

5. How might we today qualify or describe Paul’s apparent attitude towards slavery? Can you think of any modern day earthly “causes” for which Paul might not be as interested or as passionate as some today would prefer?

Slavery wasn’t a major item on Paul’s agenda. We could even say that he was nonchalant about it. This was because he was concerned with much more important matters (e.g., salvation and the kingdom of God). This would suggest that any number of “hot socio-political issues” and modern “causes” would also have failed to enflame his passion (e.g., environmental issues, human rights issues similar to slavery, animal rights, etc.)

This is not to say that a Christian should never be involved in such matters, but that they should not be put on equal level with spiritual issues, nor should they be promoted or imposed on others as essential to godly living.

6. What is the common principle expressed in these passages: 1 Corinthians 7:17-24, Colossians 3:1-2, Matthew 6:32-34?

Our focus is to be on eternal things and particularly salvation. Social change is not a bad thing, but the Christian method of producing social change is fundamentally through the conversion to Christ of lost sinners. Using political methods to promote social change is optional and not a priority. Our trust should be on God’s wisdom (cp. Chapters 1-4) and not on human authorities, governments and legislation.

Note the textual similarities between certain phrases in this passage and Colossians 3:1-2.

Col 3:1-2	=	1 Cor 7:21, 23
“If then you were raised with Christ...		You were bought with a price;
set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth.”	=	“Do not be concerned about it....

1 Corinthians 7:25-40, Questions about remaining single 7:25-28, Concerning “virgins”

In the first part of the chapter Paul has dealt with various marital situations: the relationship between husband and wife (1-7), singles and widowed (8-9), and Christians married to nonbelievers (10-16). He then affirmed the general principle that changing one’s social status was not a spiritual accomplishment (17-24). With the expression, “Now concerning virgins” (v. 25, cf. 7:1; 8:1), he turns to a different, though related, group about whom the Corinthians had asked for instruction. Clearly identifying this group is our first challenge as we go forward.

7. In what way are the instructions of 1 Corinthians 7:10, 12 & 25 from or not “from the Lord” as opposed to being from Paul?

Jesus spoke directly to the matter of married people remaining married (Matthew 19:4-6). To our knowledge he never addressed the specific case of a Christian married to a non-Christian. Nor did he elaborate on the matter of virgins remaining single. This is not to say that Paul’s teachings are not inspired, but that he doesn’t quote statements Jesus made while on earth.

There is confusion over who is intended by the pronoun “you” in vv. 25-28. If the phrase, “Are you bound to a wife” means married to a wife, then why does Paul add in the following verse, “even if you marry.” And if “loosed” means to divorce in “Do not seek to be loosed,” does it also mean divorced when he says, “Are you loosed from a wife?” and then adds that if you marry, you do not sin. So let’s try to determine who “you” is in verses 27-28.

8. Is “you” the same as the virgin of verse 25 or someone different? If different, who is “you” and who is the virgin? What different people or groups are clearly distinguished and instructed in verse 28?

(Note: Different translations lead us in different directions on these identities, so check around.)

Many options are suggested for this difficult passage. It becomes especially important that we stay within the text trying to understand the Corinthian situation and their questions, while making every effort to avoid importing our ideas and culture to our reading of what Paul says. Admittedly, this isn’t easy.

The word “virgins” can refer to male or female (e.g., Revelation 14:4), but usually refers to women. In verse 28, he seems to distinguish between “you” in “even if you marry,” and virgins in, “if a virgin marries.” This doesn’t seem to fit a repeat of the discussion in vv. 10-16 of whether married Christians should remain married. Clearly at least some of those labeled “you” still have the option of marrying or not, and the “virgin” has the same option. Both have the same option, but don’t seem to be the same people.

9. Could “bound to a wife” (NKJV, ESV) mean something other than being married?

The most common and traditional understanding here is: If you are bound (married) don't seek divorce (loosed), but if you are unmarried (loosed), don't seek a wife. But this calls for “loosed” to mean divorce in the 1st phrase, but simply unmarried in the second. It also means that Paul takes a unique and shockingly light approach to divorce and remarriage when he says, “if you do marry, you have not sinned,” in v. 28, since he would then be speaking to someone who is divorced (loosed).

I propose that Paul is addressing three different groups in this chapter: the married (1-7, 10-16), the single or widowed (8-9, 39-40), and the single but betrothed (25-38). In this case, “you” is the man and the “virgin” is any single woman, betrothed or not.

The word for loosed can mean divorced (Matthew 5:31), but is also used for Joseph's plan for Mary in Matthew 1:19, in which he proposed to release her from their engagement (i.e., “put her away secretly”). That, I believe, is more the sense here in 1 Cor 7.

“Bound” is usually literal as when Jesus was bound and sent to Pilate (Matt 27:2), but can be used figuratively meaning obligated or restricted in some way (Romans 7:2; 1 Cor 7:39). “Bound to a wife” (NKJV, ESV) could mean betrothed or “obligated to a woman.” In that case, Paul says, don't seek to break the betrothal. If not obligated to a woman, don't go looking for a wife. But if “you” (i.e., a man betrothed or not) do marry, that's OK. And if the virgin woman marries, that's OK as well.

Every interpretation of this passage has its strengths and weaknesses, but the betrothal angle strikes me as having the fewest problems and is more consistent with the rest of the chapter.

Now let's try to identify the “present distress” (NIV, crisis) in verse 26 (cf. “trouble” in verse 28). The word for distress is more often translated “necessity” or “need” (7:37, 2 Cor 6:4; 9:7; 12:10), but “distress” in 1 Thessalonians 3:7.

10. Distress might refer to overt persecution. What do we know for sure from Scripture (1 or 2 Corinthians and Acts 18) about persecution of Christians in Corinth?

In Acts 18, the Jews eventually opposed the preaching of Paul, but when they brought charges against him the Roman proconsul threw out the case (v. 16). Paul then remained “a good while” (v. 18), suggesting that there was no systematic persecution.

Note also that Priscilla and Aquila had fled the persecution of Jews in Rome and sought refuge in Corinth (v. 2). This would indicate that in Corinth they felt safer both as Jews and Christians.

The Corinthian letters don't give any clear indication of overt or systematic persecution of the Christians at that time. 1 Corinthians is focused on internal problems and not opposition from without.

11. What other possibilities for “present distress” do passages such as 1 Cor 4:11-13; 7:33; 2 Corinthians 5:1-2; 1 Thessalonians 3:7; Philippians 3:20-21; 4:11-13; 1 Peter 2:11-12, give us?

Obviously, times of open persecution put special pressure on Christians. When Paul was raiding the homes of Christians in Acts 8:3, husbands/wives/parents had concerns that single Christians didn't have. Accepting physical abuse is never pleasant, but if by denying Christ a man could spare his family the same torture, he might be tempted to do so.

However, in good times and hard times, life on earth is still life in a foreign or hostile environment for Christians. Compared to heaven, life on earth is always a “present distress” with an assortment of “cares of the world.” Married men and women have burdens and responsibilities that singles don't have, even though singles have their own set of challenges. Many spouses are more concerned about “providing for the family” than a single person is about his or her personal comforts. This concern for the family isn't wrong or ungodly, but it can distract us from higher priorities.

**1 Corinthians 7:25-40, Questions about remaining single
7:29-35, The time is short**

Paul's words in verses 29-31 may strike us as being a bit odd. It is probably best to take them as somewhat exaggerated statements intended to be taken other than literally and more as general examples summarizing a specific principle. Identifying that principle is one of the challenges we face.

We are also concerned with the phrase “the time is short” as applied both to the Corinthians and to ourselves. Some commentators think this refers to a specific time of hardship that was soon to fall on the Corinthian Christians, while others think it refers to final judgment. Paul gives us little information that would provide a clear answer. Nothing elsewhere in the letter suggests that his original readers would soon face an unusual crisis. In any case, the New Testament frequently admonishes Christians to be aware of the brevity and uncertainty of life on earth.

12. What has Paul taught earlier in the chapter that tells us something that Paul *could not* have meant in his words to husbands in v. 29?

The opening verses of the chapter clearly asserted that in marriage there are responsibilities to be fulfilled towards one's spouse. He explicitly identifies sexual intimacy as one of those

responsibilities. It would be a blatant contradiction now to be telling married men to live as if they were single by depriving their wives of that physical relationship.

- 13. Does the last part of verse 31 suggest a local “passing away” (i.e., limited to Corinth) or something more general? Based on your answer, what general attitude should Christians adopt towards life on earth (e.g., marriage, mourning, rejoicing or using anything of this world)? (Consider the thoughts and passages of # 11 above in your discussion).**

He clearly says that “this world is passing away,” and not, “Corinth – unlike the rest of the world – is passing away.” Christians live on earth, and serving Christ does not remove, and certainly does not prohibit, taking care of earthly needs and obligations. But we must always keep the cares of this world in their place, which is beneath our concerns for the kingdom of God.

- 14. Is it wrong, even sinful, for a husband or wife to be concerned about pleasing his or her spouse? What is God’s will for addressing family responsibilities (cf. Ephesians 5:22-33; 1 Timothy 5:8; Proverbs 31:10-31)?**

Obviously, husbands and wives have responsibilities to each other, and to literally live as though not married would be in direct contradiction of many teachings about marriage, including 1 Cor 7:1-7.

1 Corinthians 7:25-40, Questions about remaining single 7:36-40, Freedom to choose

This paragraph begins with a return to the topic of engaged couples (vv. 25-28), in which he states his preference (which he explains in the following verses), but also offers options. The NIV and ESV clearly interpret this as instructions to a man engaged and wondering if he should go ahead and marry. This seems to be a correct reading of vv. 36-38, even though the literal text allows some commentators to think that the “man” is actually the father of the virgin.

- 15. What does this passage (from v. 25 on) say to the modern-day Christian single (engaged or widowed) who wants God to “let me know” if he wants me to marry or not? How does this topic and this question relate to the matter of the sufficiency of Scripture and the need for modern-day revelation?**

Paul has stated repeatedly (9, 28, 36, 39) that the choice is up to the individual. To the single or widowed Paul says that if you want to marry, go ahead. If you want to remain

single, then remain single. That is the inspired answer. When the Bible has given the answer, and even belabored the point, why should we think that our case is so special that God will answer us directly through hints, nudges and subjective signs? A person may not be asking for God to speak directly as he did to Moses at the bush (Exodus 4), but the request still implies that God's word is in some way inadequate.

Some folks will cite the example of Gideon who put out a fleece in his conversation with God (Judges 6:36-40). But we should note that the fleece served to assure Gideon that God had really said what Gideon already knew that God had said. The fleece experience provided no new information about what Gideon should or could do.