

## 1 Corinthians 7:17-40

### Verse 17:

--Paul's emphasis is stated clearly here in this verse and repeated in **20+24**.

--Paul not only instructed the Corinthians to remain in their marriages or their single state but also, to remain in their everyday life circumstances. This was a general direction he gave to **all the churches**. \*I think it is hard for us to imagine the pressure toward social changes during the radical things happening in that first century church!\*

--So, each person was to **walk** as **the Lord has called each one**. Paul wanted each person to know that they didn't have to change an outward circumstance to *start* following Jesus or find their "calling".

--*Calling & Walking* are such wonderful expressions of the Christian life because they are so fitting. We are called by Jesus to become a follower of Jesus and walk with Him. Just think of the disciples. \*Dropping their nets/custom booth/livelihoods Vs. Those making excuses before putting their hand to the plow/following Jesus\*

--The fact that **God has distributed to each one** a certain set of circumstances doesn't mean that we are forever locked in to our current environment but that we should see wherever we are as our assigned place to begin.

### Verses 18-20:

--To further illustrate this point Paul brings up a current application of this principle that he often had to speak about in churches. The issue of circumcision.

--There was a physical procedure they did to "uncircumcise" but I don't think that is Paul's main point. Paul is saying that a Jew doesn't need to become a Gentile and a Gentile doesn't need to become a Jew to start following Jesus. \*This was a big issue since **Acts 15**.\*

--But didn't Paul have Timothy get circumcised in **Acts 16:13**? Yes, but that was for a *practical* reason and not because it had any religious significance. It was only to better witness for Christ—not because without it Timothy was a lesser Christian. \*Paul fought tooth-and-nail against the idea that circumcision was of spiritual value after conversion\*

--**(19)** To be clear about this Paul says it as simply as can be said—**Circumcision is nothing!** This would be a horror for a Jew to hear but it was no big deal for most of the Gentile Corinthian believers. Paul simply shows that circumcision—or the opposite—doesn't matter because there is no direct command from Christ.

--What will have a serious spiritual effect on our walks with Christ is whether we love Him or not by keeping His commandments or living in disobedience—not circumcision.

--So, where has God called you? Where are you? Obey Him here and now. Don't be tempted to postpone following Christ closely until some other religious or "spiritual" thing happens first.

### Verses 21-24:

--Here Paul takes the matter even further. Marriage or Circumcision may have been issues of choice but now Paul wants to make it clear that we can do the same even when we *don't* have a choice.

--(21) Paul now speaks to slaves. No doubt, many feared they would have no ability to truly serve and please God because of their uncontrollable circumstances. Graciously, Paul says to them through the Spirit—**Do not be concerned. . . or Don't let it trouble you. . .**

--Notice, he also says, but if you can be made free then **rather** (which can be translated *by all means*) be made free and then use your freedom for the Lord.

--(22) If Christ called you while a slave—while in circumstances out of your control—serve Him there in faithful obedience. And, even the man who is “free” is still really Christ's slave. \*Think of Joseph in Egypt Vs. His brothers free but guilty\*

--Freedom from slavery is not freedom *from God* or freedom *to ourselves*. This is hard for us Americans to think of but what purpose did these slaves have outside of Christ? Also, there were many “free” Christians that were dying martyrs deaths worse than those of slaves.

--(23) Paul has to remind them: **You were bought with a price!** This of course takes us back to **6:20** and the fact that we have no ownership over our own lives. We are His! And if we are His we are not to be mastered by others: physically, mentally, or spiritually. \*Ephesians 6:5-8\*

--(24) So how does Paul sum it all up? Our aim is to **remain with God!** It is better to be walking with God as a slave or martyr than walking anywhere else in the world on my own.

### Verses 25-28:

--**Now concerning virgins** (or unmarried young men or women), Paul admits that he doesn't have a clear command from Jesus Christ but he is going to give his advice as a person God has mercifully used as a trustworthy source in such matters.

--Now, we get this section confused when we don't see Paul's pastoral heart in this matter. He is not commanding either singleness or marriage here. He is simply giving them serious things that they need to personally take into consideration before they choose either way—because he cannot make the choice for them.

--First, Paul says that they should take into consideration **the present distress** (There are arguments as to what Paul is referring to. Is it a present issue happening in Corinth or is this more related to the last days and prophesied perilous times to come? I think it is things likely to be coming and not present as it seems the Corinthian church was quite prosperous materially).

--Paul wanted them to be clear that the decision to marry was not sin but that singleness could add to them an easier course or way through the difficulties ahead of them. They needed to count the cost.

--He also practically exhorts them not to **seek marriage. . .** in the sense of being *bent* on it. Paul doesn't say, “*Find not,*” he says, “*Seek not.*”

--What are we hunting for? What are we really looking for and hoping for?

**\*Matthew 6:33: *But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.\****

**--Seek First!**

**Verses 29-31:**

--Paul continues his seek-God-first exhortation here. First he names conditions that are a part of all our regular lives: marriage, weeping, rejoicing, making a living, life in the world, etc.

\*Morgan (The Corinthian Letters of Paul): *"Than taking the whole world, the whole material realm in which we all live, if the world becomes master, and if instead of using it, we allow it to use us, then we are abusing it, and that is what Paul is forbidding."*\*

--We should walk through this world as someone whose mind is on some other weighty business. There is nothing of firmness in this world and its **time** (*Kairos*) is short.

--The world is **passing away** and those of us who are strangers and pilgrims are *passing through*. What will we care about most at the end of our journey? On our first night home in heaven?

\*F.W. Boreham (The Nest of Spears): "But to have risen early! And to have worked hard! And to have persisted in my task until the stars appeared! That is the joy that makes the stars feel like a crown of jewels about one's brow at night. Here, before me, is the letter of an old man of ninety-three! Sir George Burns was, as everybody knows, the founder of the Cunard Steamship Company and the pioneer of trans-Atlantic travel. He was a prodigious worker and a Christian of the sturdy Scottish type. And here he is, in his ninety-fourth year, looking back upon life. Under a sky that is crowded with stars he is reviewing his long day's work.

'Mine has been a highly prosperous career,' he says, 'and I am most thankful for it. But in looking back as I do now, this reflection gives me no real satisfaction; there is nothing in that fact upon which I can rest. But when I read, as I have been reading lately, letters written by myself as a young man sixty or seventy years ago, and when I find that then I was fully decided for Christ, that knowledge indeed rejoices my heart in my old age.'

The man to whom the stars of evening suggest such thoughts as these is listening, if ever man listened, to the music of the spheres."\*

--If this week was to be your last, how would you have wished to have lived?

**Verses 32-35:**

--Again, the thrust of Paul's exhortation is clearly stated in **35: *that you may serve the Lord without distraction***. In that light, he is addressing marriage and singleness.

--So he acknowledges a difference in **cares** between the married life and the unmarried life.

--In the married life, cares must be obediently and responsibly balanced. That is always a challenge for anyone who wants to live for the Lord.

--In the single life, the person is free to simply think of the Lord.

--So the single life faces a greater danger in sexual purity (as Paul already acknowledged) and the married life faces a greater danger in losing the desire to seek and serve the Lord (where many just seek to serve themselves and their spouse). \*We are all too well aware of the sad history of those who stop seeking to please the Lord after finding a relationship.\*

--Pastorally, Paul knows their *own profit* will be richest when they are seeking and serving the Lord *without distraction*.

#### **Verses 36-38:**

--The issue here is in the specifics but not in the main message. Is this a picture of a man engaged to a virgin and questioning whether to break off the engagement (**36**)? Or is this a picture of a father trying to decide if it is a sin to give his daughter to be married (**38**)? I am not sure!

--Either way, Paul's main point is clear: Singleness as a way to live life in service to the Lord is great. Singleness as a more "spiritual" condition is wrong. Marriage is not wrong and we should never harm others by holding them back from an acceptable marriage in God's sight.

--How is it that the other *does better*? I see it as an act of greater faith to trust one's daughter to the Lord alone Vs. Trusting your daughter to a man and the Lord.

#### **Verses 39-40:**

--Finally, in reminder of marriage Paul wants to remind them of two things:

1) Marriage is until death.

2) Marriage is *only in the Lord* (as all of life "in Christ" and not merely just marrying another believer, though that is no doubt part of it).

--We are joining to another in a covenant before the Lord Jesus Christ to love them (and the Lord together) with all we have for as long as we live.

--We already spoke about marriage in the Lord. If we are aiming to love God and serve God we cannot willingly marry a person who does not have either of those goals in their heart. To marry an unbeliever is a willing act of disobedience. So how can I expect to do something good in the life of another by starting with sin? No, this is a personal issue of a heart that either lacks faith or the sincere intent to obey.

--On the other side of the coin, there is so much that is beautiful about marriage in the Lord! I am particularly blessed by the number of interracial marriages in our fellowship: Black, White, Latino, Indian, Brazilian, Ukrainian, Asian, etc. and in a culture that is constantly heated over racism all these marriages are an evidence that the love of God in Christ is the central thing shared.

--That said, for all of us married folk, I think it is important to remember we only have so long. This is an excerpt from Susanna Spurgeon, written ten years after her husband's passing, from Dallimore's book, *Spurgeon: A Biography*:

\*"I have travelled far now on life's journey, and having climbed one of the few remaining hills between earth and heaven, I stand awhile on this vantage ground and look back across the country through which the Lord had led me. . . I can see two pilgrims treading the highway of life together, hand in hand—heart linked to heart. True, they have had rivers to ford, mountains to cross, fierce enemies to fight and many dangers to go through. But their Guide was watchful, their Deliverer unailing, and of them it might truly be said, 'In all their affliction He was afflicted, and the Angel of His presence saved them; and He bare them and carried them all the days of old.'

Mostly they went on their way singing; and for one of them at least, there was no greater joy than to tell others of the grace and glory of the blessed King to whose land he was hastening. And while he thus spoke, the power of the Lord was seen and the angels rejoiced over repenting sinners.

But at last they came to a place on the road where two ways met. And here, amidst the terrors of a storm such as they had never before encountered, they parted company—the one being caught up to the invisible glory, and the other, battered and bruised by the awful tempest, henceforth toiling along the road—alone!

But the 'goodness and mercy' which for so many years had followed the two travelers, did not leave the solitary one. Rather did the tenderness of the Lord 'lead on softly,' and choose green pastures for the tired feet, and still waters for the solace and refreshment of His trembling child.

He gave, moreover, into her hands a solemn charge—to help fellow pilgrims along the road, therewith filling her life with blessed interest, and healing her own deep sorrow by giving her power to relieve and comfort others."\*

--So, as long as your husband or spouse lives, and you have not yet come to the place on the road where two ways part, treasure the gift of you marriage *in the Lord*.

--Paul ends with something of an ironic response to the Corinthian insistence on their spiritual knowledge and wisdom.