**To Marry or Not to Marry**

February 21, 2021

1 Corinthians 7:1-16, 25–40

Key Verse 7:35 “I am saying this for your own good, not to restrict you, but that you may live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord.”

As we studied in the previous chapter, the Corinthian church had a problem of sexual immorality. Some were saying that since they believed in Jesus, they had a right to do anything, such as going to prostitutes. In response to that, some were advocating another extreme view, which was never to have sexual relations with a woman. They taught that singleness, being celibate, is spiritually superior since you denied yourself the flesh desire, and totally devoted yourself to Jesus Christ. Not only that, they condemned those who were married, and encouraged them to leave their spouses in order to be celibate so they could be more spiritual. And people who were married to an unbeliever were getting out fast because there was supposedly a defilement in being married to an unbeliever and having sexual relation with an unbeliever. Is being single spiritually superior to marriage? Paul gives an answer. Both are gifts from God. Whether married or unmarried, we need to serve God in undivided devotion.

As we know, in the early church so many Christians were slaves. At that time, slaves did not have a right. They were at the mercy of their owner. When they wanted to get married, the owner of the slaves would have to agree. The owner would say, “All right, you two can live in a tent together,” and that consummated a certain kind of slave marriage, called tent companionship. If the owner didn’t like the way they were doing together, he could go in there and take them part, or he could sell off the husband, or the wife. So many Christians would have had such mixed up marital backgrounds. Is Paul going to say, “All right, all of you that are just tent companions, cut it out. Get out of there. It’s not right?” What Paul did was to not try to break up everything, but to try to teach them the sanctity of the marriage. If they were living together under a tent companionship, he would simply say to them, “Stay together. Prove yourselves true to one another. Love one another. Make everything of that marriage that God designed it to be. Those were some of the problems they were dealing with. But add to that, here were the real great problems. The moral character within marriage had so been destroyed that divorce was very rampant. There are records of people who had been married as many as 27, 28, 29 times. There was immorality; there was rampant homosexuality; Having a mistress was very common; men used their wives to clean up the house, and cook the meals, and take care of the children, and then they had other women for their pleasure.

Look at verse 1. “Now for the matters you wrote about: It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.” Paul says that being single is good. He repeats it in verse 8 and 26. “It is good for a man to stay unmarried as I do.” Many people today like singleness because they don’t want to commit to anything. They want to enjoy their lives on their own. Or they may be afraid of marriage because their parents experienced painful divorces. But that is not what Paul is talking about. Paul is talking about celibacy. Today, many people want to have boyfriends or girlfriends. So many people think if you are not married, there is something wrong with you. People say, “You must have some abnormalities. Something is wrong with you.” But Paul is saying, “It is good to be single. It’s fine. Nothing wrong with that at all.” Singleness should be celebrated. An unmarried person can go to the ends of the earth to preach the gospel. But a married person cannot go anywhere as he wants. He must consult his wife. For example, Dr. Joseph Chung wanted to go to Bangladesh as a missionary when he was young. But his wife said no. So he could not go.

Paul strongly advocated a celibate lifestyle. Paul was truly happy to live that way and did not envy married people at all. Paul was convinced that he could serve God better than others as a single man. However, Paul deeply acknowledged that this is a gift from God, echoing Jesus’ own teaching (Mt 19:11-12). Those who have this gift should serve God in single devotion all their lifetimes. In UBF there is a beautiful example of one who did this: Mother Sarah Barry. When asked, “Why didn’t you marry?” She said, “I didn’t have time.” She devoted herself fully to God’s work. God blessed her with many spiritual children who are spread all over the world. There are some other beautiful women of God such as Mother Teresa. Women who can live like them should. Men who can live like Paul should. Amen. Yet not everyone can.

Look at verse 2. “But since there is so much immorality, each man should have sexual relations with his own wife, and each woman with her own husband.” This is the general rule. A person should marry one partner of the opposite sex and live with them while on earth. Married people should enjoy sexual relations and be satisfied with God’s gift to them. Then they can overcome the temptation to indulge in sexual immorality, such as adultery, prostitution, or pornography. What happened at Corinth was that when some of them were saved, they immediately said, “Well, in order for us to be totally set apart unto God, we are going to stop all of our physical relationships.” Some overzealous husband decided that he was going to give all of his devotion to God and said, “Honey, I am not going to do anything physical with you anymore,” or some overzealous wife said, “I am now totally committed to Jesus Christ. I can’t have sexual relations with you, especially since you are not a Christian.”

In verses 3-4, Paul explains that the husband and wife should fulfill their marital duty to each other. Neither one should have a selfish view of this; it is not for their own gratification, but for mutual satisfaction; and it is becoming one in God. The well-known North American phrase, “Not tonight, honey, I have a headache,” should not be spoken in godly homes. In verse 5, Paul warns that neither one should deprive the other. Sometimes, in anger, one partner does so. He or she gives silent treatment. This is selfish and mean. According to marriage counselors, it carries a danger of inciting illicit affairs. The only time a husband and wife should suspend sexual relations is to devote themselves to personal prayer. This should be done by mutual agreement, for a specified time. As soon as it is over, they should come together again. Otherwise they can be tempted by Satan. If they are divided, angry and fighting with each other, their prayers are hindered. However, as the two become one, their prayers are effective and powerful and they enjoy God’s victory over the devil every day (1 Pe 3:7). The Bible as a whole teaches that marriage is God’s blessing upon mankind to live a happy and fruitful life for the glory of God.

Look at verses 10-11. “A wife must not separate from her husband…A husband must not divorce his wife.” This is according to the word of the Lord. Jesus taught that the hidden motive for divorce is to marry someone else. Jesus called it adultery. In a Christian marriage, there can be no thought of divorce, even in a dream. Jesus said in Mark 10:8-9, “...the two will become one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.” To be sure, there are rough moments for every married couple. Someone said about marriage life as follows: For three weeks you explore; for the next three months you love; for the next three years you fight; for the next 30 years you endure. According to psychology study, a person’s love feeling toward the other person does not last more than 1 year and 6 months. No matter how strong your feelings are, they die down. After that you begin to see weaknesses of the other. But when Christ is the Lord of the family, they are rooted in an everlasting love and truth that unites them inseparably to bear much fruit for the glory of God. Therefore, if a believer has even a slight thought of divorce, he or she must repent immediately and ask God’s mercy upon them.

What did Paul say to those who had unbelieving spouses (12-24)? This is more complicated. This is a situation where one of the spouses became a believer after marriage. The Bible strongly warns that believers must not marry unbelievers (2Co 6:14). In that situation, if the unbeliever is willing to live with them, the believer must not divorce (12). It seems that some of the “super-spiritual” people were advising these people to just divorce, just like Ezra commanded the Israelites who married the Gentiles (Ez 10:2-3). But Paul says no and advises them to stay in the marriage. There are difficulties involved in a mixed marriage, but they must do their best to work it out. God regards their union as sanctified through the faith of the believer. Their children will share in God’s blessing. In UBF also, some are serving God with all their hearts, even though their spouses do not share their faith. We only thank God for their faithful struggle which no one else can understand.

Look at verse 15. “But if the unbeliever leaves, let it be so. The brother or sister is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace.” Sometimes, unbelieving spouses can become the devil’s instrument to destroy the faith of the believer. Their constant harassment is a fierce spiritual battle. Though it is painful to bear, the believer is not to seek a divorce in this case. However, if the unbeliever decides to leave, the believer should let them go. God wants his children to live in peace. We must acknowledge that believers have no control over the rebirth of others, even of spouses. Spiritual rebirth is God’s sovereign miracle. We should not think that we can convert our spouses by our own effort. Verse 16 says, “How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?”

Look at verses 26-28. “I think that it is good for a man to remain as he is…But if you do marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned. But those who marry will face many troubles in this life, and I want to spare you this.” Here Paul is talking about the troubles that come when you have to live intimately with a sinner. Marriage is pressing two sinners together. And anytime you press two sinners together, there is trouble. Occasionally there is anger, selfishness, childishness, and self-centeredness. The potential for misery in marriage is greater than the potential for misery being single because when you are single there is only one person who can make you miserable. Some people say, “I need to get married because I am lonely.” So they get married and often are far more lonely after married than before because somebody so close becomes so indifferent, and that is crushing. Here we see Paul’s shepherd heart. He is ambivalent about marriage. Marriage is good; Singleness is good. The reason for such ambivalence is that even though singleness is better in times of trouble, marriage is a norm for most people.

Look at verses 29-31. “What I mean, brothers and sisters, is that the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they do not…those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep; those who use things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away.” The things that concern us so much in this world will vanish. Marriage as we know it is limited to this world. We should not try to hold on temporal things as if they last forever. Rather, we must put all our hope in the coming kingdom of God. Our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for our sins on the cross, has forgiven us and called us to eternal life in his kingdom. His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom. His kingdom is paradise. There are no tears, sorrows or pains, and no more death. We must live for his kingdom. We must do our best to prepare for his kingdom while living in this world. In verses 32-34, Paul warns of the danger of a divided heart among married believers. “I would like you to be free from concern. An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord’s affairs—how he can please the Lord. But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world—how he can please his wife—and his interests are divided.” Marriage demands husbands and wives to be concerned about each other. They should take care of each other. However, there is a danger that their concern can become worldly. Some people dream of endless romance without mission, or endless family gathering without mission. However, this leads to misery. When the family becomes an end in itself, it has lost connection with Christ. Then the marriage or the family takes one’s heart away from God. If our hearts are divided in this way, we cannot please God. This does not mean that married people should all divorce in order to serve God better—not at all. It is a warning that we must please God first in this perishing world.

Look at verse 35. “I am saying this for your good, not to restrict you, but that you may live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord.” Paul is teaching us the good life, the happy life, the most rewarding life. It is to serve the Lord in undivided devotion. Deuteronomy 6:5 says, “Love the Lord your God with all you heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.” God did not give us this command to burden us, but to bless us abundantly. God is the source of life and blessing. When we love God with all our heart, God blesses us. When a husband and wife love the Lord and are devoted to him, they can be blessed by God abundantly. They can serve God most fruitfully. One and one is not two, but eleven. The best way to spread the blessing of God in our corrupted culture may be to fill the world with godly house churches and with many godly children. So we pray for 10,000 house churches to be raised in UBF for God’s world mission purpose.

To those who have already established house churches, let us today rededicate them to the Lord in undivided devotion. To those who have not yet established house churches, may God bless you to do so. To those who have decided to live like St. Paul or Mother Sarah Barry, may God bless you and use you powerfully. Whatever our situation, we are most happy when we serve the Lord in undivided devotion.

Big Idea: Whether married or unmarried, we need to serve God.