

1 Corinthians 7:25-40

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[0:00] Do turn up, 1 Corinthians 7, page 956, the Black Bibles, 1 Corinthians 7, and it's great to see so many visitors.

It's lovely to have you. Just to let you know, you're dropping into a series that we're doing in the book. This isn't just an arbitrary thing that I've decided to preach on this morning. It's just the next section in the book of 1 Corinthians.

And each week as I've been preparing and I stand up and I see the visitors, I feel I need to say that more and more because of the material that Paul keeps putting in front of us here. 1 Corinthians 7, beginning at 25.

Now, some of you, well, all of us, if we're over the age of six, if you're over the age of six this morning, you know what it's like to live through major social upheaval.

Because if you're over six, you'll remember COVID. And COVID was a time when normal was anything but normal. Some of us here this morning, I know there are some of you here this morning who you remember when life in your homeland of Ukraine was taking along just fine.

[1:11] And then it wasn't. And more recently, of course, it's Iran. Things have changed. And when a distress like this happens, whether it's a pandemic or a war or something significant, the normal ways of life end up going out the window.

Relationships change. Plans are canceled or put on hold. Things are different for a season. Normal, well, we got that phrase in COVID, didn't we? The new normal. Now, for Christians, when these kinds of things happen, we still have to serve the Lord.

We're still required to honor Him in all that we do. But the things that we do are a bit different. I realize this is very live for some of us this morning. But even if we just imagine that experience, we are able to grasp the kind of atmosphere in Corinth as Paul writes to this church.

It's not a pandemic or a war. But when Paul responds to their questions, particularly about relationships, his answers are framed by major social and political dislocation that is happening in Corinth at the time.

Verse 26, do you see? Verse 26, in view of this present distress. Then you go down to verses 29 to 31, and he says, This present form of this world is passing away.

[2:32] This is not regular run-of-the-mill life. The situation that Paul is writing to here is not ordinary, and therefore things are a bit different. It's vitally important that we see this, because if we take Paul's instructions here and bypass the specifics of the Corinthian situation to make them a hard rule in all cases, we're going to get into trouble, because we'll find ourselves out of step with the broad sweep of the Bible story as a whole.

So, if we think about that, the foundational charge at the beginning of the Bible given to humanity is to marry and have children, to be fruitful and multiply and fill and subdue the earth.

That stands for all time as a regular pattern. Here, however, Paul is saying something that contradicts that. Why does he do that? It's not that the old instructions no longer apply, but rather that the circumstances in Corinth, the circumstances that are beyond the Corinthians' control, mean things might need to be different for a time.

And as we've been seeing, in chapter 7, the area under discussion is relationships. Paul has talked to married people, he's talked to single people, and now he has a word for two other groups.

First verse 25, the betrothed. Now, interestingly, this is a continuation of the point that began back in verse 1. It is likely here that the fathers are asking, should they then betroth their daughters?

[4:00] Given all that's going on, should we betroth our daughters? To be betrothed was like being engaged. That's the closest thing we have today, but it was a much bigger deal involving a bigger commitment than we're used to.

There were legal implications, for example. Then Paul speaks, verse 39, to widows. If a wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives, but if her husband dies, she is free to be married, and so on.

So, in that case, it is widows. They're probably younger widows who would be keen to remarry, and he advises them as well. The essence of the question is whether or not those who are not married should go ahead and marry or not.

And Paul says he doesn't have a command from the Lord on this question. That is, the Lord Jesus didn't speak exclusively to this point in the Gospels. But verse 25, Paul is trustworthy.

He's an apostle. So, verse 40, his authority comes from the Holy Spirit. You see that? When we're reading our Bibles, we need to understand that Paul's teaching, the apostle's teaching, in the Scriptures is no less authoritative than the Lord Jesus.

[5 : 06] So, what does he say we must do about engagement and marriage and widowhood in a time of social and political upheaval?

Here's his answer. It depends. Now, that's quite a short sermon, so I think I should probably say a bit more. What should we do? It depends.

Paul's point, the whole way through this chapter, has been that every Christian, wherever you are, whatever you have, whatever you don't have, you should be content. Content in the place where you were when God called you, whether married or not.

Whether in this situation, earlier on we heard it was he was talking to a willing unbeliever. That is, if you're married to somebody, you come to Christ. If your unbelieving spouse is willing to stay with you, you should stay with them.

Whether you're unmarried and able to control your desires or not, whatever your ethnic background, whatever your social status. Look, verse 24, just up from the section we've had this morning, in whatever condition each was called, there let him remain with God.

[6 : 10] I want you to be content, Paul is saying. Content with what you have, content with what you don't have, trust the Lord. Before we move on, I want to be clear.

This speaks both to the power of the gospel and the sufficiency of the Lord Jesus. Now, what I mean by that is, when you put your faith in Christ, you are forgiven every sin, and you're reconciled to God.

You are given a completely new identity. The old identity, the categories that you apply to yourself and that others apply to you that define who you are, they are done.

You are now a Christian because you are in Christ by faith, and therefore, it is God who defines you, and it is who you are in Christ that is your identity.

All those expectations, all of that need to achieve that you felt that others have put on you, all of that expectation that you would be able to obtain those things that others put upon you, the expectations and the desires that you have to get to a certain level.

[7 : 18] All of that, whether it's your family or your friends or the culture around you, all of the things that they say, you need to have this in order to be acceptable, it's all gone. The God of heaven and earth loves you.

The God of heaven and earth has accepted you in His Son, whatever state you are in. So, you don't need to be in any other state than the one that you are in in order to flourish in life as God has designed.

I want you to hear that this morning. We're talking about sort of insider baseball in Corinth, it seems, a little bit. It's very specific. There's lots here for us, obviously, but it's really important that in the context of what we're talking about, you hear that.

When you put your faith in Christ, you are set free from the enslavement of the opinions of others, of the expectations of others, of the opinions and expectations that you put on yourself. You're in Christ, and you don't need to be anything other than the state that you are in before Christ to live a life of flourishing.

When you find contentment hard or elusive, when you feel the pressure of those expectations, it's all very well me saying that's who you are in Christ, but when you feel the pressure of those expectations rise up, when you feel the struggle, you want the good things that God gives.

[8 : 37] You've read your Bible. You say, oh, I would like these things, and He doesn't give them in that situation. Well, the sufficiency of Christ means that because He has given you His Holy Spirit who lives in you, He has given you all the strength that you need to resist the temptation and to keep trusting the Lord.

Christ enables you to be content. It is not something you need to work up inside yourself. It is Christ by His Holy Spirit who enables you to be content in who the Lord has made you to be in the situation that the Lord has placed you in.

And this is true even in turbulent times. It might not be COVID. It might not be a war, but there may be some sort of turbulence going on in your life. You need to hear this.

You need to understand that in Christ, God has given you all the resources you need to be content and to keep trusting Him. But we see Paul is pushing this out.

Paul is pushing this call to contentment out into the corners of the Corinthian situation. And as he does that, I want us to see is both practical and realistic. While we aren't in exactly the same situation today, I want us to see three principles that underpin what Paul is saying that should help us think about relationships in the right way at any time, turbulent or otherwise.

[9 : 54] And the first is this. Marriage is not right for everyone in all situations. Marriage is not right for everyone in all situations. Verse 26, I think that in view of the present distress, it is good for a person to remain as he is.

Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife. But if you do marry, you have not sinned. And if a betrothed woman marries, she has not sinned. As I've said, Paul's answer is framed by the context.

Firstly, this present distress. Now, we're not told what that present distress was. Historians talk about a famine followed by serious flooding, that kind of thing, at the time that Paul wrote.

And some of the historical records talk about the situation, the distress being so significant that there was a shortage of certain things and people then began to riot in order to get those things.

Do you remember in COVID, all the bulk buying, the people nicking stuff out of other people's trolleys, and people like stuff online, people fighting in the supermarket, going for the last toilet roll?

[10 : 59] Well, it seems that people have been doing that for quite a while. Added to that, the imperial cult in Corinth, there was a law that required people to offer worship to the emperor and to other gods.

You had to make a little pinch of incense to the emperor and bow the knee to him. Caesar was Lord. Well, Christians couldn't do that, could they? Because we know that only Jesus is Lord. And so, if you refuse to bow to the Caesar, you're going to get a very hard time.

Well, it seems the persecution of Christians simply for being Christians has a long pedigree as well. Now, while we don't know, we don't know what the Corinthians were experiencing.

They clearly knew exactly what Paul was talking about. Think about it like this. In a thousand years' time, the historical records of 2020 will have words like social distancing in the records.

Next slide, please, in the historical records. And in 2026, they will have mentions of something called Project Freedom and the Strait of Hormuz. Now, we know exactly what that means, but it might not make sense to those who come later.

[12 : 06] That's what's going on here with the present distress. And what that means is that the questions that they're asking about relationships are natural questions to ask. Do we marry? Do we wait?

Should I be looking for a spouse at the moment, given everything that's going on? And then add to that a second situational factor. It's there in verse 29. Do you see?

Look at verse 29. Now, Paul here is anticipating a time of trouble when marital status would actually seem irrelevant.

People wouldn't be talking about it. When weeping and rejoicing would seem pointless. When buying things would have no significance. It was a unique time in history in the first century when believers were living in the transition of the ages.

So, the Lord Jesus, in history, went to the cross, died, and rose again, and returned to the Father in heaven.

[13 : 23] With that cataclysmic event in history, the old order of things had finished. The curtain in the temple, you remember, was torn down. The old Israelite religious structures were now obsolete.

And the vestiges of that era were passing away. And Christ then is raised and ascended. His Spirit is poured out on all believers.

And with the pouring out of His Spirit at Pentecost, what is happening is that the new era under the reign of Christ is beginning and gathering momentum. This shift was culturally, politically, and religiously seismic.

And Paul is saying, in light of these major societal dislocations, verse 38, it's better to refrain from marriage.

Verse 40, the widow will be happier if she remains single. One commentator puts it like this, The very structure of the old Judaic eon was about to go defunct.

[14:23] The Christian eon was beginning, and the convulsions that would occur would make it not a marrying time. There are circumstances in life when singleness is the better option.

We did see that in the pandemic. People didn't know what the future held, and they put off major plans, including getting married. It's the same in wartime. I doubt many people in Iran are planning weddings at the moment.

And this has also been true down the ages in the church in times of persecution. Marriage is not right for everyone in all times. And the reason for that is the second principle that Paul gives us. Here it is. Point number two, marriage and family come with big responsibilities. Marriage and family comes with big responsibilities. Paul describes these as worldly troubles.

Not in the sense of kind of worldliness in the negative sense of the word, but it is concerning things of the earth, of this world. So verse 32, I don't need to tell you that when a man marries, he has a responsibility to care for his wife as he cares for his own body.

[15:48] That's what we're called to. He's called to sacrifice for her as Christ has sacrificed for his bride, the church. A husband is called to cherish and love his wife and provide for and care for any children that their marriage produces.

That's a lot to think about. That's a lot to worry about when you're also worried about where your next meal is coming from. Or how to navigate HR at work because of something you've said about the Lord Jesus.

Or when the bombs start to drop. When a woman marries, she now has earthly responsibilities as well. She's to respect her husband.

And as his helper, she is to orient her life towards him in their shared mission of filling and subduing the earth according to God's design. That is hard to do when the culture mocks this kind of thing.

That is hard to do when you are separated because you've had to flee the country because of your faith in Christ. And so on. You get the point. Marriage comes with responsibilities.

[16:53] You become one with your spouse. You are bound to them as long as you live, verse 39. Until parted by death, you no longer only have your own interests but other interests to consider. Paul is saying here that in the present context, these Corinthians should be free from those concerns.

Free from those anxieties, verse 32. In order that they can devote themselves wholeheartedly to the Lord. Now, if you've been here, you'll know I've made this point earlier in chapter 7.

It is one thing to provide for yourself when times are tough. It's another thing altogether when you have to provide for a wife and children. It's one thing to stand up for Christ when you might lose your job. It's another thing completely when that job keeps a roof over your family's head.

You might be willing to endure persecution for the sake of Christ. You might think twice if your children are going to be bullied or worse because of the stand that you take.

Because of the current, because of the impending struggles, and because of what marriage requires of you, Paul says it is not a good time to marry and start a family. Singleness is not being held up as a timeless good in the universal sense, but there are times when it makes good sense.

[18:09] Paul isn't trying to be difficult, verse 35, but he wants to benefit these Corinthians in difficult times. But, but, but, with all that said, Paul says, third principle, marriage is always better than sin.

That's the third principle. Marriage is always better than sin. All the way through, Paul is clear that even in the most turbulent times, it is not sinful to marry. Verse 28, can you see? Look at verse 28. But if you do marry, you've not sinned. And if a betrothed woman marries, she has not sinned. But the main reason why you would marry in these circumstances contains, concerns rather, sexual sin. Now, this has been a thread that we've seen run through most of the letter to this point. Paul's actually just returning to verse 9, where he said of the unmarried and widows, it is good for them to remain single as I am, but if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry.

For it is better to marry than to burn with passion. It's the same point in verse 36. If anyone thinks that he's not behaving properly towards his betrothed, if his passions are strong, and it has to be, let him do as he wishes.

[19 : 15] Let them marry. It is no sin. Now, that's a tricky verse for a number of reasons. I think there's something, I'll not bother going into it now.

The underlying point is that if someone is unable to get their desires under control, they are free to marry, even in turbulent times, even in present distress.

Paul is always realistic. He thinks it's better for people to travel light, so to speak, because of the times that they're living in.

But not everyone can manage their sexual desires. Not everyone is gifted with celibacy the way that Paul was, verse 7. Do you remember we talked about that? And he's saying in that situation, those people should marry.

Here's the bottom line. He's saying this. If you haven't been gifted with celibacy and you consistently fall into sexual sin, you'd be better off with a wife during times of persecution than an internet browser full of porn.

[20 : 15] You'd be better off with a husband during a distressing time than Tinder. You'd be better off turning your fiancé into your spouse in a time of persecution than getting into a habit of sinning together in a time of persecution.

In this case, he's saying marriage is always better than sin. And one further pastoral note to make on that. Look at verse 39. It's a detail that Paul includes here.

That spouse should be a Christian. When Paul talks to widows, he says the death of their husband means they're no longer bound by the marriage covenant and they are free to remarry.

And they can marry whomever they wish with one stipulation. A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she's free to be married to whom she wishes. Only in the Lord.

If you belong to the Lord, you should only marry someone who belongs to the Lord. Paul has already made provision for marriages where one spouse is an unbeliever.

[21 : 20] And he's encouraged those in that situation to stay married. Remember, one believing spouse sanctifies the household. It's not that that person defiles you. It's that you actually sanctify them.

But that is the case where one party comes to Christ when they're already married. In the normal run of things, to marry an unbeliever would be to add strife on top of sin. Rather than creating a context for obedience that Paul has in mind here.

Paul talks in 2 Corinthians, his next letter here, about being unequally yoked. He's not talking about eggs. It's not egg yolks. The image is the wooden yoke that went across the necks of the two cows as they plowed the field.

It was the piece of wood that kept them together going in the same direction. If they are pulling in separate directions, the whole thing grinds to a halt.

They're pulling in different directions. They don't make any forward progress because they're joined to each other. And then the whole thing is painful and frustrating. It's a good image. Well done, the Apostle Paul by the Holy Spirit.

[22 : 26] I'm sure he's delighted that I said it was a good image. It is good though because if two people with completely different visions of life, whose lives are pulling in completely different directions, get into any kind of formal partnership, if you put the yoke of marriage on, it's a recipe for trouble.

It's a recipe for pain and frustration. And look, I say this, knowing that some of you desperately want to be married and you haven't met a worthy Christian and there is an unbeliever who is great in every other way, don't do it.

However much you convince yourself that it'll be okay, it isn't God's design, and you'll either drift away from Him or you're simply storing heartache up for the future. Marriage is always better than sin, but only when it is marriage in the Lord.

How else could you pursue the undivided devotion to Him that Paul wants in verse 35? This is an option you're considering. My counsel is this, save yourself the anxiety.

Don't add strife to sin. I know it's painful. I know it's painful. But don't add strife to sin. So chapter 7, when it comes to relationships, Paul wants Christian believers to be content, whatever their status.

[23 : 52] Whatever is going on around you, it is not more or less godly to be single or married or more or less godly to be from a certain background. Sometimes circumstances dictate that it may be better to travel life.

But in the end, the big issue is your devotion to the Lord. Choose the option that best enables you to do this. Choose the option that best enables you to avoid sin and to walk in holiness.

And where that's not happening, keep asking the Lord to give you the desires of your heart, the good things that you long for that His Word holds out. Keep asking Him to grant you contentment while you wait.

Because as Paul says elsewhere, godliness with contentment is great gain. Let's pray together.