

| 1 Corinthians |

Week 12 Scripture Guide | 1 Corinthians 7:6-40

Biblical Context

Paul now begins to unpack the dynamic nature of a variety of relationships—addressing marriage, divorce, and singleness—in light of the gospel. He opens this section expressing his desire that all were as he is—single, celibate, and content (7:7a). Paul was not married and it is possible that his celibacy was held as a model of sexual restraint by some Corinthians, but also provided tensions between his personal life and his affirmation of marriage.¹ Both the ability to remain single, celibate, and gospel centered as well as faithfully married and gospel centered, were viewed as gifts (χάρισμα, *charisma*) from God (7:7b).² The gift, in this context, concerns the capacity or ability to focus on the work of the gospel without being overtaken by sexual desires, in both singleness and marriage. Believers who are married should remain married and fulfill their marital obligations (7:4), but believers who are unmarried and do not struggle with sexual desires should remain single. Jesus addresses this in Matthew 19. In the context of Jesus talking about divorce, much like the Corinthians, the disciples concluded, “If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry” (Matt 19:10; cf. 1 Cor 7:1). In response, Jesus informed his disciples that singleness and celibacy was not for everyone, but for those to whom it has been given (Matt 19:11).³ In 1 Cor 7:8, when Paul addresses the unmarried (ἄγαμος, *agamos*, m.) and the widows (χήρα, *chera*, f.), he says that it is good for them to remain single, as he was.⁴ But if the individual cannot remain unmarried and exercise self-control, sexually, marriage is a better option (1 Cor 7:9).⁵ “The lack of self-control Paul refers to is not necessarily some form of sexual immorality, but may only be the struggle with erotic desires. If sexual desire is a chronic distraction and temptation, disrupting a life lived out for the gospel, Paul advocates marriage.”⁶ Also, those whose desires are so powerful that they “cannot live for God and are at risk of *porneia* ought to conclude that they do not have Paul’s gift (7:7) and should get married.”⁷ For Paul, singleness is preferred (7:7, 8, 32, 37, 38b, 40), but marriage is allowed (7:9, 28, 33, 36, 38a) and good (Eph 5:32).

Paul addresses married believers in 1 Cor 7:10-16. To the Christian married couple, Paul enforces the instruction of Jesus: “the wife should not separate (χωρίζω, *chōridzō*, ‘leave,’ ‘divide’) from her husband...and the husband should not divorce (ἀφίημι, *aphiemi*, ‘send away’) his wife” (7:10-11).⁸ As in the previous passage, some married believers were advocating celibacy in marriage, defrauding their spouses of sexual relations, putting themselves and their spouse at risk of moral failure and shame (7:1-5). Some married Corinthians “of the antisex persuasion...were going a step further, seeking to be celibate by simply divorcing their partners (for ascetic reasons).”⁹ That Paul mentions the wife first might suggest that the women of Corinth were taking the initiative of leaving their husbands. The women in question are referred to as “eschatological women” (super-spiritual, thinking they were already living in the end times), urging divorce in order to remain “pure.”¹⁰ Paul offers a concession regarding divorce and separation, “but if she does (leave her husband), she should remain unmarried

¹ Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 285.

² The word *charisma* occurs 7 times in 1 Corinthians. Paul uses it in the sense of “gifts” that carry responsibilities specifically to God and his people. The gift (*charisma*) of marriage or singleness is understood in a similar sense to the gifts in 1 Corinthians 12, that glorify God and build up the church.

³ Jesus clarifies, “For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let the one who is able to receive this receive it” (Matt 19:12).

⁴ The word “single” is not translated, but understood from the context. Paul later lists benefits of being single, in light of the gospel (1 Cor 7:32-35). He is also not forbidding marriage for either the unmarried or the widow, but gives concession in 1 Cor 7:9 and 7:39-40.

⁵ Paul uses the word “burn” which some suggest refers to the Day of Judgment and facing the fires of hell. Others, however, show that “burning” was a widespread metaphor for the forces of erotic passion in both Jewish and pagan sources. “The fire is not to be doused by fleeting, illicit sexual encounters or by grim repression of natural sexual desire,” as in various pagan sources, but by getting married and having sex with your spouse.” Ciampa, 289.

⁶ Ciampa, 288. While this individual may not have the “gift of singleness,” Paul does not have a flippant view of marriage (i.e. just marry anyone).

⁷ Ciampa, 289. Marriage is not touted as a “fix” for dealing with *porneia*, but for sexual relations to be kept within the confines of the marital covenant.

⁸ Paul uses a strong verb, παραγγέλλω (*parangellō*), “command, order, give charge” because he is giving a charge that is from Jesus. Paul is referencing the sayings of Jesus: “Whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another commits adultery” (Matt 19:9), and “makes his wife commit adultery” (5:32), and “whoever marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery” (Luke 16:18). Both Jesus and Paul take the marital covenant seriously. What Jesus is saying is in response to the Pharisees view, divorce a woman for whatever reason you desire.

⁹ Ciampa, 290. Because Roman Corinth was populated by veterans and freedmen moved there by Julius Caesar there were many instances where wives and husbands became divorced, or even swapped spouses. W. Harold Mare, *New Testament Background Commentary: A New Dictionary of Words, Phrases and Situations in Bible Order* (Ross-shire, UK: Mentor, 2004), 262. Prohibition of divorce is unique in antiquity. In Jewish Palestine, a wife could only “leave” her husband, but not divorce him. In Roman society, either partner could divorce the other. Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 1 Co 7:10–11.

¹⁰ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, ed. Ned B. Stonehouse et al., Revised Edition., The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 326.

or else be reconciled to her husband” (7:11a). Paul states the ideal, to not separate, to not divorce, but gives the concession that should this occur, how one should behave. “Thus ‘no divorce’ is not turned into law, and the woman who does so is not put out of the community. What is disallowed is precisely what one finds in the teaching of Jesus: no adultery.”¹¹ Those who have separated or divorced, then, are charged to remain unmarried (and celibate) or reconcile to their spouse.¹² “To the rest...” Paul addresses the Christians who are married to unbelievers and gives instruction that has not explicitly been given by Jesus.¹³ The Corinthians had various reactions to the gospel in the context of relationships: some condoned immorality (5:1-13), were sexually permissive and promiscuous (6:12-20), were abstaining from sex within marriage (7:1-5), or were divorcing their spouses to remain sexually “pure” (7:10-11). Some Christians likely held the view that their unbelieving spouse was contaminating the marriage and viewed divorce as an option (cf. 7:12-16). Paul argues that if the unbelieving spouse is willing to remain part of the marital covenant, the Christian spouse should remain with them and not divorce (send away). Through the marital covenant, the unbelieving spouse and the children are “made holy” (*ἀγιαζῶ*, *hagiadzō*) in the real sense that they are “set apart” from other unbelievers and the evil of the world and by the godly influence of the believing spouse may one day put their faith in Jesus and receive salvation.¹⁴ Should the unbelieving spouse leave, they are not enslaved in the marriage. The believer should pursue peace.¹⁵

The unifying theme of this section is that the Corinthian believer should “remain as he/she is.” Paul urges believers to stay in the social condition they are in at the time of conversion, relating to God’s call (7:17-24). “Only let each person lead the life (*περιπατέω*, *peripateō*, “walk”) that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him” (7:17a). What Paul illustrates in 7:17-24 is that the gospel transcends all relationships and social status. This has to do with how the Christian lives out their Christian life, and not just to “retain” their personal social setting but rather that they recognize their current setting as a platform to live out God’s call.¹⁶ Married believers should remain married (1 Cor 7:1-5, 10-16) and be concerned with fulfilling their spouse’s needs (7:3, 33, 34b).¹⁷ Unmarried Christians should remain unmarried (7:6-8; unless they lack giftedness to remain celibate, cf. v. 9), and thus be concerned with how they may please the Lord and be holy in body and spirit (7:32, 34a).¹⁸ Paul is writing these things with an eschatological urgency. The “spiritual” and “eschatological” Corinthians have had a skewed view of kingdom living; Paul writes from a posture of anticipation regarding Christ’s future return (cf. 1:8; 7:26, 29), the resurrection, as well as the Corinthians’ wholeness and holiness.

Connection and Application

The Corinthians misunderstood how to apply the gospel in their relationships. The over-realized eschatology, perversion of grace, and pursuit of an ascetic ideal all misrepresented how they were called to walk out their faith in Jesus. While he recognizes that marriage between a man and a woman represents Christ and the church, Paul, a single and celibate man, shows how the gifts of both singleness and marriage exemplify the gospel. While we are far removed in both time and location from this culture, identity in relationships is still an influence for the church. We do not always understand how to apply the gospel to our own relationships. God has called each of us to glorify him in the life we have been assigned, whether married or single. Are you married? Seek to meet the needs of the spouse with whom God has gifted you and glorify God in your marriage. Are you single? Seek to serve the Lord and his church in your giftedness, glorifying God with a life set-apart to him. In every case, we are not our own, but have been purchased by the blood of Jesus. Glorify him where he has placed you.

¹¹ Fee, 326–327.

¹² While there is no explicit biblical instruction regarding actions to be taken in the case of abuse in marriage, how one should behave when separated/divorced from their spouse is addressed. The Bible is clear throughout that God does not condone abuse, neglect, or oppression.

¹³ When Paul says, “I, not the Lord” in 1 Cor 7:10, this does not indicate that this is only his opinion and should be disregarded, only that Jesus has not specifically spoken to this issue.

¹⁴ This verse is not saying that the unbelieving spouse is made holy in the sense that they have a saving relationship with Jesus, or that the children do not need to put their own faith in Christ. They are set apart in the context of a marital covenant that keeps them from the negative influences of the world. To send away the unbelieving spouse because they are “contaminating” the marriage is to put them and the children back in the world’s influence.

¹⁵ In the event that the unbelieving spouse depart, Paul does not specify whether or not the believing spouse should remarry. The context suggests that perhaps the believer should remain unmarried and celibate.

¹⁶ Fee, 342.

¹⁷ Paul is not saying that the married believers cannot please the Lord, only that they must be properly concerned with caring for their spouse. The married person who neglects their spouse to solely serve God has misunderstood what devotion to the Lord requires and fails to honor God. Ciampa, 351.

¹⁸ Some have suggested that “holy both in body and in spirit” is a quote from the Corinthian ascetics. Holy, here, carries the general sense of “belonging exclusively to God.” Ciampa, 351.