

To Marry or Not to Marry? *I Corinthians 7:17-40*

"To be, or not to be" is the famous question in the opening phrase of a soliloquy in William Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*. "To marry or not to marry" is a question asked of Paul in a letter from members of the church in Corinth.

They are wrestling between two schools of Greek thought regarding the body: libertinism – anything goes, or asceticism – nothing goes. Paul, in chapter six of First Corinthians, addresses the issue of libertinism. He says that the body was not made for impurity but holiness. The believer's body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, thus one should glorify God in the body. In doing so, he declares that sexual involvement is to be enjoyed only within the boundaries of a marriage relationship between one man and one woman.

In chapter seven, Paul deals with the other school of thought – that the needs and desires of the body should be suppressed and denied. Some in the church advocated that married couples should no longer have sexual relations as part of the marriage experience. Paul counters that by teaching that sex should be a regular part of a marriage lest one of the spouses become frustrated and turn elsewhere, outside of marriage, to have their needs met.

There is this amazing teaching that addresses both men and women as sexual beings, created that way by God, and establishes an equal obligation within marriage of yielding authority over their bodies, each to the other.

The questions from the Corinthians continued: "What if I'm single? Is it okay to marry? What if I'm already married? Should I divorce and be single? What if I'm married to an unbeliever? Will I be defiled because of that?"

In the last part of chapter seven, Paul is going to speak more to the unmarried person, giving advice about marrying or not marrying. But before he does that, there is what I would call a hinge point that brings perspective to marriage and non-marriage. It is about contentment, living for the glory of God in whatever state you find yourself.

I was talking with one of the staff on Friday about this concept which we will see in a moment and she told me of a local pastor and his wife at a former church who were from Texas. The wife, in particular, would always talk about how wonderful Texas was, how she wished they could move back there, etc.

Some time later it was noticed that she had stopped talking about Texas. When she was asked about it, the woman told of reading this passage about being content in the state you

are in, and deciding she should be content with the state of Virginia and stop pining about Texas. Now that's wonderful, but not exactly Paul's point!

Turn in your Bible to First Corinthians, chapter seven, and let's read the passage and then see how it all fits within this larger section.

I Corinthians 7:17-24

David Garland, in his commentary on First Corinthians, gives a great overview of this passage, sort of a road map where Paul is going. I can't improve on it, so let's take a look. Here's the structure:

Statement of basic principle

- Example
- Rationale

Restatement of basic principle

- Example
- Exception
- Rationale

Restatement of the basic principle

1. Statement of the basic principle: As the Lord has apportioned and God has called, live your life (7:17)
 - a. Example: Circumcision and uncircumcision (7:18)
 - b. Rationale: Circumcision and uncircumcision are nothing (7:19)
2. Restatement of the basic principle: Remain in the calling in which you were called (7:20)
 - a. Example: Slavery (7:21ab)
 - b. Exception: If you can gain your freedom, make use of it (7:21cd)
 - c. Rationale: The slave is the Lord's freedman, and the free person is the Lord's slave (7:22-23)
3. Restatement of the basic principle: Remain before God in the calling in which you were called (7:24)

Let's go back to the text and see what Paul is teaching here. **Verse 17** – What is the call that Paul is talking about? He seems to be saying that one should be content to live life in whatever state one is in when God calls them to salvation.

Now we know that Paul is not saying that if you are single when you come to faith in Christ, there are no circumstances under which you should ever marry. Back in verse 9, he says that if one doesn't have the gift of self-control to remain celibate, they should marry.

Paul is saying that one's status, racially or socially, is of no consequence to God and none are incompatible with God's calling to salvation. God does not value one over the other, and neither should we.

With that in mind, then, we should be diligent to live in the way that God has called us to live. ESV reads "lead the life." NIV renders this as "retain the place." The Greek word is one of my favorites:

peripatéō- to walk, to order one's conduct or behavior

It is the most active word used in the New Testament to describe how we ought to live. Paul writes, for example, in Ephesians 4:

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called.... – *Ephesians 4:1*

Paul says to the Corinthians that our walk is not conditional on our social status or our ethnic status – two examples he will use to drive his point home. Then he adds that this is his instructions to all the churches. He isn't singling out those in Corinth; it is a general rule of teaching for everyone.

Paul's first example is circumcision. Were you circumcised (speaking to the Jews) when you were saved? Don't undo that. There was a medical procedure one would undergo that would reverse the appearance of circumcision. Paul says remain as you are.

Are you uncircumcised, speaking to the Gentiles? Remain that way. Don't get circumcised, which of course, was the insistence of the Judaizers who sought to compel Gentile converts to Christ to live as Jews.

Paul says that neither count for anything. What a radical thought even for Paul who was steeped in Judaism. He makes a similar point in writing to the Romans, a letter written a couple of years after this one.

For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit.... – *Romans 2:28-29*

There is a whole new covenant arrangement with the fulfillment of God's plan of salvation through the death of Jesus, his Son. There is equal standing before God through Christ. That's why Paul writes in Galatians, chapter three:

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. – *Galatians 3:28*

Within the body of Christ, there is equal standing with God, equal value to God, equal responsibility before God. We are to live our lives accordingly.

So, Paul calls for a contentedness in whatever state one finds themselves, whether married or single. Remember this passage is supporting the previous one (addressing the married) and the next one (addressing the unmarried).

Contentment is a very important and needed virtue in the believer's life – in so many areas. The word *contentment* means literally "self-sufficient." William Barclay writes about this word:

It is a frame of mind which is completely independent of all outward and external things, and which carries the secret of happiness within itself.

How many single Christians think, "If only I was married, I would be happy?" How many married people think, "If only I was single....?" Live your life, single or married, with a focus on your calling to salvation, not your state in life.

Paul restates the principle in **Verse 20**. Then he gives another example, one that has to do with one's social standing in society.

I Corinthians 7:21-22

One third of those in Corinth were slaves; another third were freedmen. Paul says that if you were a slave when God saved you, don't worry about it. It is of no consequence in your salvation.

This is not an endorsement of slavery by Paul. Many have tried to justify that view, but it is a misunderstanding of what Paul is saying. His point is that it is inconsequential to God if you were a slave when you believed. You were saved when you were a slave. Live your life in a way pleasing to God even in that social position.

But Paul does add an exception. "If you have the opportunity to become free, by all means take advantage of it." The converse would also be true. If you do not have the opportunity

to become free, live in the spiritual realm as if you were free. Indeed, in Christ, you are his slave.

Paul would certainly have understood that one has more opportunities to serve the Lord if free and not under the authority of a human master. So if one could become free, it makes sense to do so in order to be more effective in serving Christ. However, if you are not free you are still to contentedly live to serve and glorify God because you are a freedman to Christ.

In a contemporary application, I have often heard Christians say, “If only I didn’t have to work in a secular job. If I was able to go into full-time ministry I could really serve Christ.” Now there is some truth to that in terms of time and focus. But if you can’t or won’t serve Christ where you are and in what vocational state you are, what makes you think you would do so without the restraint of a full-time job?

The story is told of an eleventh-century German king, King Henry III, who, having grown tired of court life and the pressures of being a monarch, applied to a monastery to be accepted for a life of contemplation. The religious superior of the monastery, Prior Richard, is reported to have said, “Your Majesty, do you understand that the pledge here is one of obedience? That will be hard because you have been a king.”

Henry replied, “I understand. The rest of my life I will be obedient to you, as Christ leads you.”

“Then I will tell you what to do,” said Prior Richard. “Go back to your throne and serve faithfully in the place where God has placed you.” When King Henry III died, a statement was written: “The King learned to rule by being obedient.”

Look back at chapter seven, **Verse 23**. Here’s the foundation point in all this: We have been bought with a price. The Apostle Peter tells us what that price was:

...knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ.... – *I Peter 1:18-19*

Paul says that one’s contentment should come from the fact that you belong to God. And your commitment should be to live in a godly way whether married or single, Jew or Gentile, slave or free.

Paul moves on to address a further question that was raised having to do with those who were at the present time unmarried. He may be giving a response to those in the church who were promoting celibacy.

Paul's instructions, as you will notice, are given here to the man. That shouldn't seem strange given the first-century culture. It was the man who took the lead in arranging betrothals and marriages.

The gist of Paul's counsel is that those who are single should remain single if they could be content to live that way. And he lists several reasons why that is. The first has to do with what he calls "the present distress."

I Corinthians 7:25-28a

Bible scholars hold different views of what this "distress" is. Many believe Paul is talking about the return of Christ and the associated difficulties present as the time nears.

Others think that it must be referring to something in the present, some distressing circumstances. Suggestions have included famine or perhaps persecution of some sort. Whatever it is, members of the church were going through a trying time and Paul encourages them, in light of that, to not marry but stay as they are.

And yet, again Paul is pragmatic and not dogmatic; he says that should they marry, that is okay. There is no sin in doing so.

But he wants them to know something else: married people have troubles. **Verse 28b** – I think this is something that probably every married person in the room would agree with.

A pastor visited the fourth-grade Sunday School class to talk about marriage. He asked the class, "What does God say about marriage?" Immediately one boy replied, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Marriage doesn't really solve problems; it reveals them; it brings them to the surface. I remember a student at Virginia Tech when Nancy and I were on staff with Campus Crusade. Driving to another campus nearby to do some ministry we got talking about marriage. He said something like: "Well, when I get married, we won't have any problems." I thought to myself, "Buddy, you just wait!"

Paul says to the unmarried, "Consider what you will deal with if married." Think through the consequences of entering into that life situation. A six-year-old boy told his father he wanted to marry the little girl across the street. The father, being modern and well-schooled in handling children, hid his smile behind his hand.

"That's a serious step," he said. "Have you thought it out completely?"

"Yes," his young son answered. "We can spend one week in my room and the next in hers. It's right across the street, so I can run home if I get scared of the dark."

"How about transportation?" the father asked. "I have my wagon, and we both have our tricycles," the little boy answered. The boy had an answer to every question the father raised.

Finally, in exasperation, his dad asked, "What about babies? When you're married, you're liable to have babies, you know."

"We've thought about that, too," the little boy replied. "We're not going to have babies. Every time she lays an egg, I'm going to step on it!"

Paul adds a third reason to carefully consider marrying – **Verse 29-31**

This is a reminder of the fleeting nature of life on earth. Paul felt an urgency in serving the Lord. He sees the benefit of not becoming overly attached to the things in this lifetime, what the world had to offer. These are all temporary, fleeting, passing away. Normal human activities draw our attention and focus and energies away from doing the Lord's work.

Yet another concern of Paul regarding marriage is that those who are married are focused on doing what pleases their spouse. One's focus is divided. Look what he says.

I Corinthians 7:32-35

Taking time to meet the needs of a spouse and family means less time to serve the needs of other believers and those in the world. And yet, Paul isn't willing to fully embrace the pro-celibacy faction in Corinth. And so he states that it is not his desire to "lay any restraint upon" them.

Here's the key – in verse 35 – whatever situation, married or single, that promotes good order and devotion to the Lord, is right for an individual.

Paul continues by addressing a very particular situation. If a man is engaged, that is – betrothed, and he is not able to control his sexual desires, it is best that he marry. If, on the other hand, God gives him the gift of self-control, and he sees that the best way to serve God is by staying single, then it is better that he remain single.

I Corinthians 7:36-38

If a person does get married, Paul reminds them of the life-time commitment they are making. “Until death do us part.”

I Corinthians 7:39-40

This is all about keeping promises that one makes in marrying another. It is a serious thing to enter marriage and care must be given before one makes such a commitment.

To marry or not to marry; that is the question. Warren Wiersbe, in his commentary on First Corinthians – *Be Wise*, suggests five questions that ought to be considered when a person is contemplating marriage. They form a good summary of this entire chapter:

- 1) What is my gift from God?
- 2) Am I marrying a believer?
- 3) Are the circumstances such that marriage is right?
- 4) How will marriage affect my service for Christ?
- 5) Am I prepared to enter into this union for life?

There are many instances where the answers to those questions would affirm one’s decision to marry. Paul would be fully supportive of that decision. To another, careful consideration might lead one to choose to remain single. To which Paul would say, “And that is even better for your service to the Lord.”

In either decision: to marry or not to marry, find your contentment not in your married status but in your salvation. Walk in a manner worthy of your calling in the Lord.