

TITLE: DEALING WITH “THE PRESENT DISTRESS”

TEXT: 1 CORINTHIANS 7

INTRO: There are 3 subtopics in this chapter: **1)** To the unmarried, don’t marry unless you must (then fulfill marital responsibilities), **2)** Married, don’t divorce; don’t force an unbeliever to stay, and **3)** don’t make any unnecessary life changes. The key to understanding this chapter is recognizing the main reason for these instructions – the **present distress** (v. 26).

I. TO THE UNMARRIED (v. 1-9):

A. (v. 1-7) General instructions to the unmarried

1. (v. 1) Stay single! *Now concerning the things whereof you wrote to me* – Paul begins to answer questions they’d asked. Apparently they had questions about Christians marrying & divorcing. The first topic is seen in Paul’s statement, “*It is good for a man not to touch* (adhere or cling to; marry) *a woman.*” This is because of the “present distress” (v. 26). Christians are not always discouraged from marrying (e.g., younger widows – **1 Tim 5:14**). We must marry in order to raise children.
2. (v. 2-5) If you marry, then fulfill your marital obligations.
 - a. (v. 2) *Because of fornication, let every man have his own wife....* You should stay single. However, you should marry if you can’t control your sexual desires. Here is a reference to a specific form of fornication – premarital sex.
 - b. (v. 3-4) *Let the husband render to the wife due* (something owed, obligation) *benevolence* (Strong’s – kindness; “euphemistically conjugal duty”). Each spouse **owes** this to the other. *Neither has power* (authority) *over his own body, but the other does!* Spouses do not have the authority to withhold this for any and every reason. Neither do they have authority to share this with anyone other than the spouse. Paul says all this in a very firm yet delicate way.
 - c. (v. 5) One limited exception. *Don’t defraud* (keep back; rob) *one another, except to devote yourselves to prayer & fasting* (the only exception is for religious reasons – a higher priority – cf. **Ex 19:15**). But, this was to be done **1)** only with the consent of **both** parties (*both* must agree to this break), and **2)** only for a time (shouldn’t be too long – otherwise the desire will cause temptation).
3. (v. 6-7) The higher priority – stay single! *I speak this by permission, not of commandment.* You’re permitted to get married, or to stay single, but not commanded to do either. *Paul* was able to stay single (not a *spiritual* gift; just an ability).

B. (v. 8-9) Recap – stay single if you can, but marry if you must.

II. TO THE MARRIED (v. 10-16):

A. (v. 10-11) To all married (Christians, non-Christians, or mixed)

1. (v. 10) *Unto the married* – he does NOT say “to couples where both are Christians.” Many claim this addresses a *Christian* couple, whereas **v. 12-16** is to a Christian/non-Christian (mixed) couple. However, if this were so, then **v. 10-11** would not apply to the mixed couples! But we know that **v. 10-11** applies to **all** married couples! We know this to be true because he is repeating what Jesus said (*not I, but the Lord*), which applies to everyone, Christian or not. He echoes Jesus’ words in **Mt 19:6** – “*What God hath joined together, let not man put asunder*” (same word as ‘depart’ here in **v. 10**).
2. (v. 11) *But if she departs, let her a) remain unmarried, or b) be reconciled....* These are the only two options!
 - a. Paul acknowledges that she might divorce anyway. This would be sin (transgressing God’s law – **1 Jn 3:4**). This sin can be forgiven if she repents. She may reconcile because of this repentance, or she may not have this option.
 - b. If she chooses the option of remarriage (an option **not authorized**), she now commits a 2nd sin – adultery. And as long as she is in that 2nd relationship, she is an adulterer, and makes her partner one as well (**Mt 19:9**).
 - c. Jesus gave one and only one exception to this rule – only if someone puts away his/her spouse **for the cause of fornication** (**Mt 19:9**). In this case, by implication, this person is **not** committing adultery if he/she remarries.

*This is **Christ’s** law, and it applies to the Christian couple, the non-Christian couple, and the mixed couple!

B. (v. 12-16) To Christians with non-Christians spouses

1. (v. 12-13) *To the rest speak I, not the Lord: If any brother has an unbelieving wife who is pleased to dwell w/him....*
 - a. *To the rest* – who or what is “the rest?” The answer is found in comparing “*not I, but the Lord*” (**v. 10**) with “*I, not the Lord*” (**v. 12**). The “rest” are the people or questions **not** addressed by the Lord’s teaching in **v. 10-11**. The teaching in **v. 10-11** is what *Jesus* taught in **Mt 19:3-12** (specifically v.9), and applies to **ALL!!** What Paul teaches in **v. 12-16** is *in addition to* Jesus’ teaching; it is not a different teaching for a different group of people; it is simply a subcategory of all married people, with a concern **not** addressed by Christ.
 - b. *If an unbeliever is pleased to dwell with the believer....* Context: the unbeliever might desire to leave because of this “present distress” – persecution of Christians.
 - c. *Let the believer not put away the unbeliever.* These brethren who had become Christians, but whose spouses hadn’t, may have thought they should divorce them, rather than being defiled by and unequally yoked with an unbeliever.
2. (v. 14) *The unbelieving spouse is sanctified...* This doesn’t mean that the unbeliever & the children are automatically saved because of the believer (which would contradict **many** passages). The unbeliever, by remaining with his/her Christian spouse, allows himself to be under the influence of God through the Christian (**v. 16**; cf. **1 Pet 3:1-3**); he is **not** defiled by the unbeliever!
3. (v. 15) *If the unbeliever departs, let him depart. A brother or sister is not under bondage....*
 - a. “Let him depart” – this is sin on his part, but not hers (as evidenced by Paul’s allowance here). Today if your spouse wants a divorce, you have no choice (no-fault divorce). You’re not sinning if it’s beyond your control. The question is **are you entitled to remarry?** The law has already been given – remain unmarried or be reconciled. The only exception to this rule was given solely to the spouse who puts away his/her spouse **for the cause of fornication** (**Mt 19:9**).
 - b. Is another exception given here? If so, it would **only** be to a Christian whose non-Christian spouse insists on leaving because his spouse is a Christian! Most who claim that this is another exception do not meet the criteria anyway!

*But what does this verse say? “*Let him depart. A brother or sister is not under bondage....*”

- **“Bondage” is from the Greek word “douloo”** (to enslave, make a servant). Contrary to popular notion, the marriage bond is **never** one of slavery or servitude! *It is a bond* (husband & wife are to bound for life–**v. 39**), but this bond is

never described with the word “doulou.” “Doulou” is *always* used in reference to master/slave relationships. The Greek word for the marriage bond is “deo” (as used in **v. 27 & 39**).

- **“Not under bondage” is in the perfect tense**, which describes something from the past that is still felt in the present (e.g., “I *have* eaten” means “I ate in the past, and I’m still not hungry yet”). You have never been under this bondage! You were never under it in the past, and you’re not under it now. How could this be the marriage bond, when they obviously were under the marriage bond in the past (and still are)?!
 - So, for a mixed couple, v. 10-11 applies in that they are **not** to get divorced (unless fornication is the cause). But in addition to this, if the unbeliever wants to depart, the believer is not a slave to the unbeliever (nor was she ever), and isn’t required to give up her Christianity in order to be true to her wedding vow. *There is nothing in these verses that provides another exception to Christ’s law on MDR (**Mt 19:9**), which Paul reiterates in **v. 10-11!**
4. (**v. 16**) If the unbeliever is not content to dwell with you, and you try to force him, there will be no peace for either of you. You’ll have less chance of saving him because your influence on him will be damaged.

III. **TO THE CHURCH IN GENERAL (v. 17-40):**

A. (**v. 17-28**) **Remain in your calling**

1. (**v. 17-20**) Circumcised or uncircumcised
(**v. 17**) Thesis for v. 17-28 – According to the abilities God’s given each of you, walk as the Lord has called each of you. He’s going to say this again in **v. 20 & 24**. Don’t change certain *authorized* things in order to be a Christian. Some try to use this verse to circumvent repentance (“I don’t have to change; I’ll just be a Christian in this same condition!”). This is **not** what Paul is saying (he has already condemned certain sins in **6:9-10**). He wouldn’t tell them to remain in sin!
(**v. 18-19**) It doesn’t matter whether you’re circumcised (Jew or proselyte) or uncircumcised. Don’t attempt to change this! What matters is keeping the commandments of God (which shows that **v. 17, 20, & 24** can’t refer to staying in sin).
2. (**v. 21-24**) Servant or free – doesn’t matter! If you can gain your freedom, do it (cf. Onesimus & Philemon)! A servant is the Christ’s free man, and a free man is Christ’s servant. Either way, all Christians are free from sin, but servants of Christ (**1 Pet 2:16**). *You’re bought with a price (6:20)*, Christ’s blood – *don’t be slaves of men (Col 2:20-23 – “why are you subject to ordinances?”)*. Don’t be slaves to these issues that don’t matter: circumcision/uncircumcision, bond/free, etc.
3. (**v. 25-28**) Married or single
(**v. 25**) *Concerning virgins (M or F)*– Jesus didn’t talk about this, but Paul does, and he was inspired (so it’s the same)!
(**v. 26**) Contextually, here is the key verse. All this is because of *the present distress* (increased persecution– cf. **Jer 16:1-4**), and so *it’s good for a man so to be* [to be as he is]. It’s good for him not to change, but again, this does **not** include his sin!
(**v. 27-28**) *Are you bound to a wife, don’t seek to be loosed*. Some claim this authorizes an adulterous marriage! If so, it would completely contradict **v. 10-11 & Mt 19:9!** It says whether single or married (scripturally), don’t seek to change. But this is *not* a commandment; you’re not sinning if you go ahead and get married. I’m just trying to spare you the trouble of worrying and suffering over a wife and children once the persecution starts!

Regarding these *optional* matters, don’t change if you don’t have to! Don’t bring any more stress on yourself than is coming!

B. (**v. 29-35**) **Purpose for these instructions**

1. (**v. 29-31**) *The time is short* (contracted, shortened; i.e., it’s at hand). *They that have wives will be as though they had none* (you may lose them); *they that weep as though they wept not* (your crying won’t matter); *they that rejoice as though they rejoiced not* (joy will be gone); *they that buy as though they possessed not (Rev 13:17– no buying or selling w/out the mark of the beast, which you got by worshipping the emperor); they that use this world as not overusing* (they won’t have the things they used to). A grim outlook – nothing is going to make any difference in the time of persecution.
2. (**v. 32-35**) How marriage right now will affect you – *He that is unmarried cares for the things that belong to the Lord...* These things are his responsibility as a husband & father (same for the married woman – **v. 34**). Spouses have obligations to each other (e.g., **v. 2-5**). It’s not sinful, but it takes away from their opportunity to pursue spiritual matters. (**v. 35**) *I tell you this for your own profit (v. 28,32), so you can serve the Lord without these distractions (Lk 10:38-42– Martha’s distraction)*.

C. (**v. 36-40**) **Final words regarding marriage**

1. (**v. 36-38**) To the father of an unmarried daughter: If you think it’s not right to keep her from marrying (as fathers had the right to do), if she’s passing the time women normally marry, and there’s a need (maybe a prior betrothal), let them marry. (**v. 37**) But the father who’s steadfast, has no necessity (constraint), and keeps his daughter, does well (better – **v. 38**).
2. (**v. 39-40**) To widows: I’ve told you that staying single is better, but that it’s okay to marry.
 - a. But understand that *the wife is bound by the law as long as her husband lives*. **1)** This is in a *scriptural* marriage, and **2)** answers any questions about opportunities to divorce (Paul gives **none**; there is *still* only one exception)!
 - b. *If her husband dies, she is free to remarry...only in the Lord*. Does this mean: **1)** Only to a Christian, or **2)** only with the Lord’s approval (i.e., to someone eligible to be married, Christian or not)? It would not be wise to marry a non-Christian (given the topic of this chapter), but Paul did not forbid this. “Only in the Lord” then must mean with the Lord’s authority (i.e., someone who is eligible to be married according to God’s law – widowed, scripturally divorced, or never married).
 - c. She’s happier if she remains single (in the context of the present distress –**v. 26**). I think I have the Spirit... He’s not unsure of this. He’s saying, “*You can trust my judgment on this!*”

CONCLUSION: Most of this chapter’s instructions are based on “the present distress.” This is a very important context to understand. However, we learn the seriousness of the marriage bond, of the responsibilities husbands and wives have to each other, and of God’s law regarding divorce and remarriage.