

**Intro:**

Well, we continue our conversation through the book of 1 Corinthians in our series: "Church: are you serious?," a series that has tried to help us move from disgust and distance from God, Jesus, and the church, to dedication. If you're here for the first time, this series is through 2000 year old letter written to the first Christians by a person named Paul, and it's actually part of a series of letter exchanges.

We've been talking about sex and relationships the last few weeks as we've gone through Chapters 6-7. Today we continue through chapter 7- we're right in the middle- and tackle the issue of singleness. Let's read through this passage together, and from there we'll make two observations, and go from there.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:17-40.

Quite a lot going on here, especially if this is your first time in this series with us. I encourage you to read/listen up so you can fully appreciate the context of what's going on here. Two things this passage is really talking about.

**For all: Be defined by God.**

Whatever social place you were in when God called you to be a follower, remain there- don't let it trouble you (go through v.17-21). Paul illustrates this by talking about two well-known social status markers in the early church and culture- that of circumcision and slavery. Note the nuances of what he means by "call"- it is the call of following Jesus (v.18).

The point is not to say you can't change your status (you can and should given certain opportunities- v. 21)- the point is that the social status doesn't matter anymore for your spiritual advancement and growth. Remember the context of a society that was high on status seeking, and so Paul needs to emphasize this. Obeying God, in whatever situation you find yourself in, is what counts (v.19). God has made us all alike (v.22), and His definition is what counts (v.23). And so, Paul says, learn to be content, learn to remain in certain situations when needed.

Why bring this up in a discussion of if people should get married or stay single? In every culture and in every place, both have social connotations- you might be less acceptable if you stay single or marry too young or old. I mean, why does a movie like 40- Year Old Virgin cause us to squirm? Paul is saying: be defined by God. Is God defining you today?

**For the Singles: Staying Single can be good.**

Let's take a look at how he talks about this (v.25-40). Some preliminary things to get out of the way:

- Who is Paul talking to, who are the "betrothed"? (v.25)

Most likely women who are promised to be married (as seen in how the word is used below, and how the word is in feminine form). Remember, this was in response to a question the Corinthians were bringing up; Paul isn't being biased. In fact, Paul will talk to both men and women, and focus in on the men's role because it was likely that the men took the initiative with the engagement procedures back then.

- Paul is not giving a universal rule. This is situational. (v.25-26)

He language here is hesitant, and different from 7:12. This is not to say that this part of the Bible doesn't carry as much weight. It's to say that, the questions involved of marriage and singleness for the Corinthians were clearly situational- based on certain circumstances in their moment, and Paul could not set down universal commands. The advice, though, is pretty sound because of Paul's relationship with God.

So what is Paul saying?

Point #1: in line with the previous section, remain (v.27-28), If you're promised to be married, go for it (this is what "bound to a wife/woman" means- these terms of engagement). If you are not, remain. Changing is not a problem, of course.

Point #2: But Paul builds up the case for remaining single, as the passage clearly shows.

Why? Three reasons.

1. *Marriage might be more troublesome than not, based on your context. (v.26, 28).*

This is what Paul is talking about in v.26, as well as v.28 (although v.28 could be interpreted generally as well. I'm going to take it to refer to the same thing in v.26). We're not too sure what the specifics may be- some believe he's referring to a famine in the region around 51BC. Whatever the case, though, Paul is expressing concern about the potential trouble that might come, given the context, if some of them were to marry.

For us today, this is good advice as well. Some of us are in places and positions in life where marriage might make it complex and be a rather stressful endeavor. Of course, it might be nice to have a partner who understands and is able to be with you in that moment- totally understandable. Again, this is Paul's informed opinion- this is not a passage of universal rules.

*2. We live in a temporary world that is quickly passing. Have framed our life in view of this?*

This is what Paul is talking about in v.29-31, and you can also view the “event” of v.26 in light of this too. The Bible speaks of this time we live in today as a unique moment- an appointed time (v.29), one between Jesus’ first coming and his second coming. This bit of time will come to an end when Jesus comes back, and the world will completely be renewed and eternity will begin. As such, the world as we know it is passing (v.31b). Paul brings up various aspects of our existence now and puts it in light of that (v.29b-31a).

Things like marriage will not go into eternity (Matt 22:22-30, Mark 12:18-27). The sorrow and joys we experience now are not the last word- our sorrow will turn to laughter (eg- Luke 6:21), and some of what we enjoy now will be shown to be nothing (Luke 6:25). And so on.

Now, Paul is not saying we should live some sort of emotion-less, disconnected life. Paul himself engages in all these things- he rejoices and mourns, he works with his hands to make a living and encouraged people to do so joyfully, and so on. And Paul and the rest of the Bible has a lot to say about the importance of this earthly existence, encouraging us to enjoy and take care of our bodies, our planet, each other. Yet the reality is that this is going to pass.

His point is this: are we framing everything we do in our lives, from marriage to work, in light of eternity? For some of us, if and when we do this, we will drop the anxiety or demand as it relates to marriage and singleness.

*3. There are no constraints to certain acts of devotion and mission to God.*

This is what’s going on in v.32-35. Now, it can be read in a pretty negative way, like those who are married cannot please God, or are inherently displeasing to God because they’re married. A few things to note: 1) first, the word “worldly” is not used to refer to something sinful- often the Bible does use it that way. But “worldly” here is based on the context of v. 31, and refers to that which is temporal, that which is passing. So it’s not about something sinful. 2) Marriage is definitely a place where one can please God. God created it in the first place, and the rest of the Bible clearly affirms this- Ephesians 5 is the clearest example (ironically from Paul’s pen). 3) All things can and should be done for God’s glory, for the love of God. 1 Cor. 10:31

What is this passage referring to then? The practical reality that marriage can and does constrain certain acts of devotion to God. Paul’s life is an example of this- his traveling, risk taking, sacrificial living- all of this would have been rightly constrained by a marriage. But because he wasn’t married, there were no constraints- all of acts of devotion to God could be lived out.

It has been said before, and I believe it stands true today- there are certain things in God’s mission to our world that are best accomplished by singles. There are certain places in the world, certain hardships to endure, certain tasks and visions to be fulfilled, where single people are the best answer. Could God be asking you today to be the answer?

Where to go then? (v.36-38)

If you’re engaged and you want to follow through, no worries.

If you want to remain single, given what I’ve said, this is good- nay, better. If you want to embrace singleness, make sure it springs from:

- a firm conviction, deciding in your own heart.
- a controlled sexual desire.

**Response:**

Have people stand.

1. Are you letting the idea of a relationship define you, or anything else for that matter? Be defined by God.

- I’d like for us, if we are in this place, to express ourselves to God by using some sign language. There are two common signs for love- cross arm, hand signal. As we sing, if you are needing God to define you, I want you to do that as we sing.

- For some, you have never really let God in your life, and this may be your first time. You can do the hand signal too, but let me tell you how to pray. You simply say- God, I’ve been running life myself, and not following you. Forgive me for that. I make a choice here to let Jesus come in my life and be the one that defines me- I choose to let Him be my only guide and truth.

2. Is God calling you to embrace your singleness and let God use it for His glory?

I want to encourage you to come up and get prayed for.

3. Do need to move forward in a relationship? Go for it.

I want to ask you to commit to getting some prayer, too. Come up for that.

**Extra Study Notes:**

v.18- for more on circumcision and slavery being used elsewhere in a similar fashion, see Galatians 3:28.

v.22- for more on our being slaves, see also Col. 4:1, Rom. 6:16-22.

v. 25- the literal word is "virgins." It most likely refers to women in the context, given that all usages in the text are in the feminine form except for the first usage (it can be neutral or feminine).

v.29- for the temporary nature of marriage, see Matt 22:22-30, Mark 12:18-27. For a comparison of the temporary nature of joy and sorrow, see Luke 6:21,25.

v.32- compare with Ephesians 5 and a more "positive" view of marriage.