

Text: 1 Corinthians 7:8-16, Part 1

Title: Instructions to people in various marital situations

Truth: Marriage is a high Christian calling and maintaining it holy honors God.

Date/Location: Sunday June 21, 2020 at FBC

Introduction

In the opening verses of chapter 7, the apostle Paul has addressed the issue of marriage generally. It is perfectly OK to be married—and it is perfectly OK to remain single. If married, however, the marital union must be faithfully maintained. It is sin not to do so.

In verse 8, Paul turns to people in various marital situations: those unmarried, those who are widows, Christian couples, unequally yoked couples, and virgins wondering if they should get married.

This passage is difficult. The problem is two-fold: understanding it properly, and being submissive to it. Actually it is probably harder to submit to it than understand it. The lack of submission to it makes people look for loopholes and alternate explanations, and that is what muddies the interpreter's task. Still, Paul does not deal with every case explicitly. Some he leaves for us to figure out.

There is another difficulty with this passage, and that is preaching it. Once you figure out the meaning, and a way to explain it, you still have the real life problem of people sitting in front of you that are in various marital situations. Some could feel condemned or convicted or mad, or feel that I am "preaching at them." I'll tell you with all the transparency that I can muster that though I have thought about this problem, I have resisted any temptation to think on any individual in the church for some kind of special application, whether divorced or in a troubled marriage situation, or single, or whatever. I have done the work of digging into the text without some kind of favoritism toward some or anti-favoritism toward others. I'm trying to report what "thus says the Lord"—and let the chips fall where they may, the shoes fit whoever they fit, and so on.

I. Unmarried and Widows, v. 8-9

Generally speaking, this category refers to people who are not presently married (and, I believe, have never been married), **or** who have been married but their spouse has died. To these ones, Paul teaches:

A. It is good to remain single—"as I am," Paul says. This comparative statement indicates that he is presently not married. He considers this a

good state to be in. (People who are single often feel a strong sense of discontent, but that is not what Scripture calls us to feel like.)

- B. Temptation in the single state is strong. This is what the phrases “self-control” and “burn with passion” mean. In the cesspool of Corinth that was especially true, but it is no less true in the modern world. The culture encourages casual relationships, immorality, pornography, etc. Man-woman marriage is the only legitimate “outlet” for human passions of this sort, even though it does not eliminate temptation. It does help to shepherd that passion into its proper place.
- C. Therefore, if that temptation is overwhelming for any individual, they are commanded to marry. That’s right—*commanded*. Yes, the Bible can give that kind of command. The verb form is translated as “let them marry” in the NKJV. But it comes from a 3rd person plural imperative form—“they must marry.” So if you come to me as a young person or a widow and say that you are struggling with temptation of this sort, then you are commanded to marry. That might sound strong, but that is how important it is to be righteous.
- D. About the two categories of people Paul is speaking to in this section. The second is easier, so I will address it first. The **widow** or **widower** had their marriage end because of the death of their spouse. This is effectively in the same category as someone never married, because their marriage ended in accordance with the vows that were made at its inception (“until death do us part”).
1. The teaching of Romans 7:2-3 is very clear that if a husband dies, the woman is released from the law of her husband and she is free to be married to another man. That is universally recognized.
 2. Later in 1 Corinthians at 7:39 Paul says that if the woman’s husband dies, she is free to be married to whom she wishes (in the Lord). She may choose to remain unmarried for the rest of her days, but she cannot be obligated by her dead former husband or some strange cultural practice to singleness the rest of her life.
 3. Paul adds in 1 Timothy 5:14 that it is the will of God for younger widows to remarry and continue raising a family. How can this be? Well, if a young woman had been married previously, that indicates she does *not* have the gift of singleness that we discussed at 1 Cor. 7:7. Since that is the case, it is assumed that she *still* does not have that gift after her first husband died. So it makes sense that she will marry again. Besides that, marriage and raising children and keeping the home are not only normal, but they are commendable, holy,

productive vocations for any young woman to be involved in. So the Bible commands it. This may sound like a harsh, meddling directive. But from another perspective, it can be a blessing as well, because a young woman who has lost her spiritual leader might want to know “what next?” God has given that to her already!

- D. Identification of the “unmarried.” What exactly is the meaning of the term “unmarried”? Does it mean (a) Never married before? (b) Any unmarried state, whether never married, divorced or widowed? (c) Married in the past but not now? (d) Divorced only? (e) Widowed only?
1. It **cannot** mean (e) widowed, because verse 8 distinguishes unmarried from widows. The two groups do not appear to overlap.
 2. It **can** mean never married, i.e. a virgin, because of v. 32-34. In the section about virgins (verse 25 and following), the apostle speaks about men who are married versus those who are not (v. 32-33). Then in the parallel section for the women, verse 34 speaks about a virgin as an unmarried woman. So *unmarried* can refer to virgins.¹
 3. It **can** refer to people who have been married but then separated. This is clear from verse 11, where a Christian wife is not to leave her husband, but if she does, her two choices are to remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband—not to be remarried to another man.²
 4. It **cannot** refer to broadly to all divorced people, because, as we see in verses 10-11 later on in the chapter, he addresses certain divorced people who are *not permitted* the possibility of remarriage. It does not matter how much internal temptation they may be experiencing. They had their chance at solving the temptation problem, and could be married again to their former spouse (if they have not remarried) in order to solve it again. Paul could not here be suggesting that if they are tempted that they should go ahead *anyway* and be married regardless of the later instruction.
 5. Let me state that last point another way: because his command is to be married, he is not speaking to all unmarried divorced people. So,

¹ Pastor John MacArthur takes a different view, suggesting that “unmarried” means “divorced” (see his *Study Bible* note at 1 Cor. 7:8). He misses that “unmarried” is used in v. 32 and 34 regarding those who have never been married—virgins. If it refers to divorced people, it only does so *in some cases*.

² It because of the word *husband* that I used *separated*. Though legally they may be divorced, they are really only separated because they still “belong” to one another as husband and wife. To get another spouse in this case would be adultery.

even though the word *unmarried* can refer to people who are divorced, I take it *in this verse* he is referring to people who were never married. If they are having problems maintaining self-control, and if they ask their parents or pastor, “How can I handle this difficulty?” the answer that Paul gives is this: get married! Obviously there are necessary cautions, the difficulty of finding a good spouse, and so forth, but God has thought ahead of time about how to help someone in this situation.

II. Married Believers, v. 10-11

This category addresses two Christian people who are married. The constraints upon them are the “strictest” because they both profess to adhere to the doctrine and practice according to godliness.

- A. “Yet not I, but the Lord.” Paul is giving authoritative commands in his role as an apostolic representative of Christ on earth. But for this instruction, he refers to the fact that the Lord had spoken on this subject previously, so it was not actually a new command at all. Where did the Lord speak on this? You will find it in Matthew 5:31-32, 19:3-11,³ and Mark 10:2-12.
- B. The flat out teaching for two professing Christians is this: a wife is not to leave her husband, and a husband is not to leave his wife. Period. Let that sink in. That’s tough, isn’t it? But here’s the thing: if you are a Christian before you get married, or at least have been exposed to the teaching of the Bible, you know it in advance. It will caution you to select wisely, with good counsel, and without succumbing to the starry-eyed syndrome.
- C. In the case that a couple cannot get it together and one divorces the other, then they are to remain separated and not be married to another. That’s also tough, and not what people want to hear, but it is what it is. This means that if you choose to separate, then you are not free to be remarried to another person. You can be remarried to the same spouse, but not another.
- D. This is not the normal idea of a divorce, where people feel that if they are divorced, they are free to be remarried. Not so in this case. There is another example where the Lord instructs that divorce is disallowed. It is found in Deut. 22:13-19.

³ The “exception clause” is not addressed by Paul. Even in such a case, divorce is not required, nor automatically built into the act of immorality. I’m not going to delve into the issue much here, other than to say this: don’t let it happen!!!! That makes things a lot easier.