

SHOULD FATHERS ALLOW THEIR DAUGHTERS TO MARRY?

1 Corinthians 7:25–40

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1 Corinthians 7:25–35 (NIV)

“Now about virgins: I have no command from the Lord, but I give a judgment as one who by the Lord’s mercy is trustworthy. Because of the present crisis, I think that it is good for you to remain as you are. Are you married? Do not seek a divorce. Are you unmarried? Do not look for a wife. But if you do marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned. But those who marry will face many troubles in this life, and I want to spare you this. What I mean, brothers, is that the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they had none; those who mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they were not; those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep; those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away. I would like you to be free from concern. An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord’s affairs—how he can please the Lord. But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world—how he can please his wife—and his interests are divided. An unmarried woman or virgin is concerned about the Lord’s affairs: Her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit. But a married woman is concerned about the affairs of this world—how she can please her husband. I am saying this for your own good, not to restrict you, but that you may live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord.”

Instead of reading verses 36–38 as is there, drop down to the footnote, because I think the alternate reading is a more accurate reading. “If anyone thinks he is not treating his daughter properly, and if she is getting along in years, and he feels she ought to marry, he should do as he

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wants. He is not sinning. He should let her get married. But the man who has settled the matter in his own mind, who is under no compulsion but has control over his own will, and who has made up his mind to keep the virgin unmarried—this man also does the right thing. So then, he who gives his virgin in marriage does right, but he who does not give her in marriage does even better” (NIV). Verses 39-40, “A woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, but he must belong to the Lord. In my judgment, she is happier if she stays as she is—and I think that I too have the Spirit of God” (NIV).

The title of today’s message may intrigue you: “Should Fathers let their Daughters Marry?” If you are a father, you’re probably saying, “I didn’t know I had a choice in the matter.” When I told my girl what I was preaching on, her response was, “Of course!”

Before we look at that intriguing question, I want us just to take a moment to again find our place in the Corinthian letter. A passage like this belongs to a larger context. A careful examination of 1 Corinthians 6:12 through chapter 7 will show that there had been in the church of Corinth at least seven different viewpoints expressed on sexuality, marriage, and the single life. And the uncertainty about one’s role, and even uncertainty among believers as to what was appropriate morally, had necessitated Paul speaking to matters and also responding to a letter that had been written to him regarding marriage and regarding fathers giving their unmarried daughters permission to marry.

There were some in the Corinthian church who taught and practiced the viewpoint that a Christian’s body was not bound by any moral restraints. They held that the spirit is what is important. Therefore, the body can be used in whatever way you want. Paul’s rebuttal to that was

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“The body belongs to the Lord. It’s a member of His. It’s also incorporated in His resurrection power. Don’t think that the body is something separate from you.”

Some in the Corinthian church on the opposite extreme taught and practiced that any physical contact between a husband and a wife was to be avoided. That there was something unspiritual about that. Paul corrected this view.

There were others in the Corinthian church who thought that there was something wrong with remaining single. This would have especially been part of the Jewish element of the congregation who looked down on a person, either male or female, who had arrived at their twenties and still had not married. You were somehow less than a full person. And by the way, that problem not only afflicted the Corinthian church, it still knocks around in the body today.

There are many false views about the single life. Some people look at singles and think that all singles are footloose and fancy free, affluent and living the good life. Others look at singles as failures—“They must not have succeeded in getting a spouse. Therefore, they must be a failure.” Others have looked at singles as suspect morally, “There must be something wrong with them, they’re not married yet.” Paul lays to rest all of these false ideologies of married persons looking at singles, saying that such may not be the case at all. It is normal and all right and proper before God to remain single, if you so choose.

There were others in the Corinthian congregation who thought it was wrong to marry at all. They said the single life is the only way. To be married is to somehow miss God’s will for your life.

There were some who thought they could walk out of any marriage if they got tired of it and try another marriage. This would, in our day, be called “No-Fault Divorce.” You just get tired of the relationship and go off and have another relationship. Paul must rebut this point of view.

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There were others who wondered whether or not a believer should separate from an unbelieving spouse.

There were some who thought that a believer should never, under any circumstance, be released from a marriage to an unbeliever.

Paul has dealt with all of the matters. Now, in the verses before us today, he comes to the question—evidently raised by the Corinthians themselves—in verse 25, “What about virgins?” He doesn’t get around to directly answering the question until verses 36–38. From verses 25–35 he gives some general principles. Finally, in verses 36–38, he answers the question they raised, “What about virgins?”

I. These verses, verses 36–38, are notoriously difficult to interpret. They have been misread greatly by many, many people. There are at least three possible views that have been taken towards these verses. Let me check them off for you.

A. Some have thought that Paul was giving counsel to platonic roommates. That is, husbands and wives choosing to have a spiritual relationship with one another but not to be married and be one flesh. Therefore, he’s saying that it’s ok to maintain a platonic relationship—man and woman can live in the same house and have a platonic relationship with one another. It’s ok for them not to get married.

This view has some serious deficiencies. One, it would give an appearance of evil. It would suggest to the outside world, that doesn’t really know what’s happening internally in the relationship, that something is going on. Two people living together without the benefit of marriage. It also would be a direct contradiction to what Paul has said in 7:5, that abstinence in a marital relationship is strictly forbidden. So I think the idea that this is written to platonic roommates can be laid to rest rather quickly.

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B. Others have taken it as counsel to the engaged, or to the betrothed. That is the spirit of what is behind the translation, “If anyone thinks he is acting improperly toward the virgin he’s engaged to and she is getting along in years and he feels he ought to marry, he should do as he wants. He is not sinning.” The problem with this point of view is that, in the Scripture, betrothal was never meant to be a permanent state. If you, for example, look at the betrothal of Mary and Joseph, you will find that the betrothal time was over after Jesus was born and the marriage was consummated. To say here that Paul here was advocating betrothal as a permanent state seems to be going beyond what the Scripture has raised elsewhere.

It also ought to be noted that the word “engaged” or “betrothed,” do not actually occur in the Greek text that Paul is writing in at all. It’s simply inserted by the translators to help us understand the passage. Literally, the words of 7:36 read, “If anyone thinks he is behaving dishonorably toward his virgin, if she be past her prime and so it ought to be, he does not sin. Let them marry.” There’s a certain ambiguity there.

C. I’d take the third position that this is counsel to fathers of unmarried daughters. Fathers of virgins. Of course, the dating relationships in those days were far different than today. A marriage was a contract relationship. The father gave his daughter away. Most frequently, dowries were involved. The daughter didn’t come up to her father, after two years of dating a guy, and say, “Dad, I’m really in love with this guy. We’ve dated for two years and we have a successful relationship. So I’m going to marry him, whether you give permission or not.” It might actually be that in those days the girl never even met the husband to be, but the father realized that that would be a good choice for her. So he made the choice. That was in his power, as a father, both by tradition and by law.

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I've been trying to tell my girl that this is a very good tradition that ought to be revived in our culture. Parents have the advantage of having more years behind them, they're able to make more sensible choices. I think a strong case could be made for that whole tradition. Of course, I wanted my own choice. But now...

But Paul here is saying to fathers who are concerned whether or not they should give their daughters away in marriage, "Are you disgracing your daughter by not letting her marry? Are you acting dishonorably toward her?" A father should raise the question, Am I doing the right thing? It might be a disgrace for her to remain unmarried. "Behaving unseemly" is the way the King James puts it. It's the same kind of idea. "Acting dishonorably towards one's daughter." He also ought to be considering the question about her being "past her prime." Which in those days, was anything over twenty years of age. Now it's considerably different, I hope. "Past her prime" meant past marriageable age. In the days when women didn't have the work opportunities they have now, who was going to provide financially for this girl who was not going into her twenties and maybe later, thirties and forties? The father wouldn't always be around. If he was not going to give her in marriage, did he have the means financially to successfully provide for her lifetime?

Here's the question that Paul is really raising here. What is going to happen to her when I'm gone, if she is now past her prime?

He is also going to have to consider the question as to whether or not his daughter has the gift for the single life. As Paul indicates here, in verse 37, in the footnote, "The man who has settled the matter in his own mind is under no compulsion." It may very well be that the compulsion he is under is a recognition of an earlier principle Paul has stated, that not all have the charisma, this

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spiritual gift for the single life. Therefore, it might well be that marriage is a choice that the father takes on as a responsibility.

Paul says that when the father is able to keep his daughter single, he does better. Not that marriage is a “least better” kind of a thing. But that, had his daughter married, he would not then been able to make the continued investment in her that he was capable of making now. He who does not give his daughter in marriage does even better, as far as he himself is concerned. There is an ability for him to maintain a sustained relationship with his daughter. In view of some other things Paul is saying about the coming trouble and the anxiety and the present crisis and the like, it seems like the single life, in Paul’s view, would give one the opportunity to more freely devote himself to the service of the Lord and His body.

Basically, his counsel to fathers of unmarried daughters is therefore, “Sure, it’s ok to give your daughter in marriage. Look at these kinds of principles when you’re considering giving her in marriage. Remember that marriage isn’t the only thing that a woman needs to do in order to be fulfilled.” That is, he’s holding the possibility before the young women of his day, quite a radical view, that a woman could be fulfilled outside of marriage. He also holds the view that a woman could be fulfilled in marriage.

Before he actually answers that question, he has dealt with some general principles which apply to all Christians. In verses 22–35 especially, and also in verses 39–40—then he is asked this question, “What about virgins?” He, first of all, establishes his right to speak to the question. He has no direct command from the Lord. That is, he is not able to point to any direct quotation about this subject, as he had been able to do earlier in regard to the sanctity of marriage and the fact that it shouldn’t be broken. So now, since he has no direct command from the Lord, he must speak as one who, by God’s grace, is trustworthy. He’s going to give his reasoned opinion. And,

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as we shared last week, simply because he expresses his opinion doesn't mean that his opinion and my opinion are equally as good. He is expressing an opinion as an apostle, and there ought to be tremendous weight attached to that, because he is speaking as one, as he later says, who believes he has the Spirit of God in giving the counsel. I believe that as you look at his advice, he really does have the Spirit of God.

II. He's saying, in verses 26–28 and 39–40, that it's all right to live a normal life in difficult times.

That's kind of a healthy thing to hear, isn't it? Today, when it's so extremely difficult to live and there's so much panic in world crisis. I think it's refreshing to say it's all right to live a normal life in a crisis time. In fact, it says, because of the present crisis, "I think it's good for you to remain as you are" (1 Corinthians 7:26). Just because there's a crisis in the world or a crisis somewhere, don't all of a sudden fly from your present responsibilities and try to take on some grandiose project or throw yourself in some kind of grand effort for the Lord.

When Paul speaks of a present crisis, we don't know if he's referring to some specific crisis in Corinth or whether he's speaking of persecution on the horizon. Probably, most likely, he's simply referring to the idea of Christians always living in a present crisis. There have been some, for example, who have taught that Jesus was coming sometime in the 1980s. That might be for them a present crisis, if one holds that particular point of view and has it locked in at that particular time—then how ought one to live in view of an impending crisis? Paul simply says, "In view of the present crisis, remain as you are." It's all right to remain married. "Are you married? Don't say, 'The world has to be saved for the Lord. Therefore, I must run off, leave my spouse and family and do things for Christ in the present crisis.' No. It's all right to remain married" (see verse 27).

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A. It's also all right to remain single. It's also all right to become married. If you're not married, you do not sin if you become married during the present crisis. It's ok to marry during a world war. It's ok to marry if the Russians invade. It's okay to marry if the Lord is coming.

He's also saying, though, that it's more convenient not to marry. That's his judgment as an apostle. He says that those who marry will have troubles in this life. The word specifically translated is "they will have tribulation in the flesh." Paul here is not expressing an opinion that's down on marriage, "If you really want a bummer, get married." He's saying what those of us who are married frankly recognize, that there are special stresses that apply to life because one is married. Marriage brings responsibility. And responsibility brings crisis, decision. It means that I have to accommodate my way of living and adjust to it. It does, in effect, bring trouble. It brings a lot else besides trouble, but trouble is one of the things that marriage brings.

Once everything I owned in life could be fit into a Volkswagen. I could take off and drive from California to Pennsylvania and work in a summer camp and do whatever I wanted. I can no more get everything I have today in a Volkswagen. Marriage brings trouble and responsibility. Not trouble I'm struggling under, but I recognize that trouble is there.

I am a person who all my life has operated on being on time or early. My wife never seems to have that built in her frame of reference. On the other hand, she always loves to shop. But somehow, I'm kind of direct. I have a need, I go to the store, and get it. If I can get out in 15 minutes, wonderful. In any marriage relationship there's some adjustment, some trouble. I can't really think of any marriage that I know well that doesn't have a problem or two in it. That's not to say that it's ruining the marriage. But it's saying that people have got to work on their adjustments and that problems in a marriage are no excuse for running away from a relationship. It's a tremendous opportunity to work through it.

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Paul expresses a very frank thing. So if you don't want to have that kind of bother, if you don't want to go through the trouble of adjusting to a relationship, by all means, don't get married.

You're free to remain single.

B. He then also gives a word about widows in verses 39–40. He says widows are free to remarry or remain as they are.

He feels, again, that it's better for them to remain as they are. But that's only his judgment. He adds, though, that if a widow remarries, she must only remarry in the Lord. The same counsel applies to unmarried persons who are marrying—as Paul will later say in Corinthians, it's wrong to be unequally yoked (2 Corinthians 6:14). Someone has put it well, “If you are a child of God and you marry a child of the devil, you are sure to have trouble with your father-in-law.” Paul says, “It's more blessed for you to remain as you are.” The person in the Early Church too. They had a provision that I think the modern church ought to look at. There appeared to be a regular office of widowhood in the church, and special designated responsibilities for widows to fulfill. Dorcas, in Acts 9, appears to be a representative of that group. An opportunity, by being a widow, to serve the broader needs of the body of Christ, given the maturity and the perspective on life that one has gained from a marriage.

So the first counsel of Paul is that it's ok to live a normal life in troubled times.

III. Then he turns right around and balances that by saying that in the troubled times, be sure you keep your priorities straight (verses 29–35).

He says the time is shortened. The present world, its outward appearance, is passing away.

What does he mean here by “the time is shortened”? Is he saying the Lord's coming very soon?

Obviously, that didn't happen in his lifetime. Maybe Paul is referring to that. Maybe, though,

he's simply looking at life in that he's getting older and recognizing the time is short. It's short

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for all of us. Life is short. It used to be that death was something that happened to people that I didn't know. That's not the case anymore. Paul is saying that in this life you can make good and legitimate duties and interests crowd out God from your life. You can let temporary matters dominate over eternal ones. Therefore, he says, for example, "Those who have wives should live as if they had none" (1 Corinthians 7:29, NIV). Is he saying, "Act as if you're not married?" That would fly in the face of all the counsel that he's given in chapter 7. He's speaking rhetorically, poetically. He's saying—in effect—this, "How does your marriage affect your relationship with God? Is your whole life wrapped up in your marriage? It better not be. You better have a focus on the eternal relationship you have with God. And not just simply be "this-time oriented." Yes, you have responsibilities to that marriage, but life can be totally wrapped up in the marriage. On the other hand, are you wrapped up in grief? Are you mourning? If you are mourning, then act as if there were no mourning. What's he saying? "Realize that in the midst of unhappiness and grief and depression, that's not all there is. There's a joy, a grace, that the Lord is at hand." And that He sprinkles His joy in the midst of our grief. And eternal joy awaits us. We never must be overcome in a moment of grief, when we've lost someone or lost something very close to us, and act as if our life has ended, because it hasn't. The gift of eternal life is exactly that. It's eternal.

On the other hand, he's saying, "Are you happy?" "Are you rejoicing?" How do times of happiness affect your relationship with the Lord? If you're happy, don't act as if you're happy. He's saying, "Don't let the sources of joy be this-time oriented. Take strength in being made joyful, because of your eternal union with Christ."

Does acquiring things make you happy? Let those who are acquiring things act as if they're not acquiring them. Don't put all your eggs, so to speak, in the basket of possessions. We just gather

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stuff, just to look at them. Don't let your life be summed up in just what you're gathering. He's also saying here how our good life affects our relationship with God. Those who are using this world, don't use it up. Don't be engrossed with this world.

Are you enjoying material prosperity? Health, wealth, and happiness? Enjoy it, yes, but don't get so wrapped up in it that you fail to put your priorities in the right position. Even the single life affects that (verses 32–35). Are you single? I think maybe we need a massive dose of Pauline theology today. The single life today as propagated by some is a time for personal enrichment and pursuit of personal interest and cares. Paul's saying the single person, of all persons, ought to be able to devote most of themselves to the work of the Lord. He sees the single life, not as a flight from responsibility nor some mad dash to some pursuit of personal pleasure and fulfillment. He sees fulfillment as taking place in the midst of responsibility. Are you single? Then you can give yourself to more eternal things. If you're married you must be concerned about the things of this world. Not that the things of this world, such as marriage, are bad. But marriage is this-world oriented. It's not something oriented for eternity.

So if you're single, he's giving counsel—don't be so wrapped up in the single life. Unwrap yourself from that pursuit and make a diligent commitment to be responsible to Christ and to serve Him and to give of the time that you have to His cause.

This then brings us back to verses 36–38. These principles are all involved in what Paul is saying to fathers and daughters. He's saying, on the one hand, it's ok to live a normal life. On the other hand, in view of the present crisis, keep your priorities straight. He indicates here that the Christian father will have modeled before his children—his daughter—the principles of being normal and yet realizing in what kind of day we live. Our children really do learn from our example, don't they?

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Paul is saying to parents, “Model the principles that you’re asking. If you’re able to live a normal life and are not under compulsion to act in a hasty way, then your children won’t need to do that either.”

He’s also saying here that the Christian father is representative of God our Father. Even as we seek our heavenly Father’s permission before we do something, so, in a certain sense, children seek the permission of their earthly father.

When I go to God the Father and ask Him for some approval on a decision in my life, how will the Lord respond to me? What does the Lord think of me? If I know how the Lord thinks of me, how then can I think of my children? And how can we know what God thinks of us?

So frequently we operate by a law system in our relationship that God must be appeased and we’re never quite accepted by God. Therefore, we work hard to be accepted by Him. Sometimes, children can get this notion that they never quite please their parents and therefore must work hard to gain their approval, as they never quite get it. Such is not the case with God our Father, and it shouldn’t be the case with us. The root idea of grace is that somehow we don’t have to measure up. That we become, in God’s eyes, the exact person that He has wanted and He has longed for. When a father has that kind of relationship with his daughter, the daughter trusts in the father’s judgment, as is what Paul is talking about here. From that model, I think we can realize that God looks at us when we seek His permission for major or minor decisions, and He’s not looking down at us trying to squash some happiness. But He’s continually saying of us, because we’re hidden in Jesus Christ and His righteousness, “You’re exactly what I want.” I think in a very real way it’s always our birthday with God. He sees us in a far different perspective than we see ourselves.

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Live normally, keep your priorities straight, and don't forget the grace of God which is extended to us.

Closing Prayer

Is it possible, Lord, that we are everything You've always wanted? How hard it is for us to take that staggering truth into our lives. That somehow, because of the cross of Jesus Christ and His sinless life, we have been so incorporated into Him that You—when looking at us—see only Jesus. And that because we are in Him, we are righteous in Your eyes. We are exactly what You want. We realize, Lord, that there are times when we don't feel that way and, therefore, we think that You may not feel that way. But when our trust has come to be placed in You and we have been born into a new and living hope, we know, Lord, that You see us in those terms. You are our heavenly Father. You celebrate our presence before You. Lord, we have looked, in these past few weeks, at difficult areas of life and relationship, areas which trouble us as modern people. Through the counsel of Your Word, I pray that there would be grace and strength imparted to us all. That if we are married, that determination to remain married and to be successful in that relationship will have really gotten a hold of us. That if a person is here that is single, they will realize that before getting married, there should be waiting upon You to determine what the gift of life is that You've placed upon them, that it may be that they can serve You in some special way by remaining unmarried. But on the other hand, perhaps You do have a special gift upon them to be married and You'll lead them to the right person. How good it is to know that You care about our decisions and You're involved in them and You give us freedom as Your children to decide responsibly in Your presence. We thank You for Your grace. We express our love once more to You this day. In Christ's name. Amen.