

Prayers

To God

Weekly theme: miracles

Give thanks to God for the wonderful healing touch by which your life is maintained. Praise Him for His healing power and for His faithfulness in love and care.

For myself

I praise You, Almighty Father, for the way you come to meet me in the midst of my troubles. I do not always understand what is happening to me, but I trust in You, Lord God, and all You do to help me. Touch me and redirect me when I fail to do what is right; take hold of my sense when they are misguided by the pressures of the world; move my tired mind when I must think again in order to find the truth; and do what is required to keep me on track with the priorities of 'the Kingdom'. Hallelujah! AMEN

For others

Pray for the victims of crime; for those who struggle to comprehend what happened to them. Pray that God's people take seriously His call to love those who suffer.

Meditation

Creation's glory is the One who spoke, and it was done.

We know of Him from the life of Jesus, His Son;
We hear of Him from His servants, who told us;
We feel Him in His powerful touch on our lives;
We read of Him in the history of the Church;
We discover Him within the pages of His Word;
We observe Him in the lives of great saints;
We appreciate Him in the healing of our wounds;
We experience Him in the power of the Holy Spirit
We honour Him in the sacrifice of our lives;

And we will be with Him in the glory of His Re-Creation!

Bible Passage

1 Corinthians 7:25-40

²⁵ Now then, I have no command from the Lord concerning unmarried women, but I give my opinion as one who is trustworthy by the mercy of the Lord.

²⁶ This is what I think is best, in view of the present crisis; it is good for people to stay as they are. ²⁷ Are you married? Do not seek divorce. Are you unmarried? Do not seek a wife. ²⁸ But if you do marry, you have not sinned, and if an unmarried woman marries, she has not sinned; yet those who do will have trouble of an earthly kind, and I would spare you that.

²⁹ *This is what I mean, fellow believers. The time has become very short. From now on, let those who have wives act as though they had none, ³⁰ those mourning as not mourning, those rejoicing as not rejoicing, those buying as having no possessions, ³¹ and those dealing with the world as having no dealings with it. For the form of this world is passing away, ³² and I want you to be free from anxieties.*

The single man is anxious about the things of the Lord and how to please the Lord, ³³ but the married man is anxious about worldly things and how to please his wife, ³⁴ and he is divided. But the single woman and the unmarried girl is anxious about the things of the Lord and how to be holy in body and spirit, whereas the married woman is anxious about worldly things and how to please her husband. ³⁵ I say this for your own good, not to place a restriction on you, but to promote good order and undivided devotion to the Lord.

³⁶ *If anyone thinks he is acting improperly towards his unmarried daughter, if she is past the normal age for marriage and it has to be, then let him do as he wishes, it is no sin; let her marry. ³⁷ But he who has settled the matter in his own heart is under no obligation, he has the will power to stand firm in this and does well to keep his daughter unmarried. ³⁸ So then, the one who gives his daughter in marriage does well, but the one who does not does even better.*

³⁹ *A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to marry whoever she wishes, only in the Lord. ⁴⁰ Yet in my judgment she is happier if she remains as she is; and I think that I too have the Spirit of God.*

Review

This is a rather lengthy and difficult passage containing several pieces of advice. As we read them, we may well be rather uncomfortable, because Paul speaks relatively plainly about singleness and marriage, and his advice is not what we might expect. For example, his general theme is that singleness is preferable to marriage as a state of Christian living in the Lord's service (e.g. 7:32-34), and this will seem to many of us to suggest that our married state is somehow less worthy of the Lord's service. Certainly, the traditional view of the Catholic Church is that priests should not marry, and this passage of 1 Corinthians offers powerful Biblical backing for this stance.

The best way to approach this passage is to do what must always be done when facing Biblical advice that is strongly coloured by the social and cultural background of the first century AD. We must seek to understand the pressures that made Paul write in this way, and also get to the heart of the spiritual principles he uses and speaks of. The message he brings may not be very palatable to us, but we can at least make a judgement as to what extent it is relevant to the life of God's people today.

One thing is obvious, however. The main reason why Paul gives this advice is his concern that God's people give undivided attention to the '*things of the Lord*' (7:32) within the short space of time he believes exists before the return of Jesus; he says '*for the form of this world is passing away ...*' (7:31). At the very least, we should agree that the urgency of the Gospel mission is no less today, but our general perspective is different, with two thousand years between Paul's ministry and ours today. We will find that any advice calling for people's undivided attention to the things of God, whatever their state, will prove to be highly contentious!

Paul's advice concerning single women (7:25-28)

Paul says first that his advice concerning unmarried women is not to be considered a '*command from the Lord*' (7:25). This is a great relief, and it typifies the caution Paul shows here. In contrast to the dogmatic statements he makes about matters of faith such as the crucifixion and the resurrection (see 1 Cor 2:1 and 15:14f.), he seems reserved and qualifies his comments here more than once; in verse 26 he says, '*what I think is best ...*'; and then in verse 35, '*I say this ... not to place a restriction on you ...*'; and in verse 40, '*yet in my judgement ...*'. This is the language of consideration and the weighing of options, not of demand or dogma.

His core advice to women and men who are single that they remain in the state they are in order to serve the Lord (7:26,27). There is much merit in advising single Christian people to be consumed with God's work and not the '*passions of the flesh*', a phrase Paul uses elsewhere (Romans 7:5, Galatians 5:24) to describe ungodliness, especially misplaced sexual desires. However, in view of yesterday's passage 7:15-24, we cannot assume that Paul is telling people to accept their personal state as fixed. The Gospel is fluid and Paul knows full well that people change over time as they are led on their pathway of life and faith. So with this in mind, he says plainly, '*but if you do marry you have not sinned*' (7:28).

It is nevertheless a little disturbing to read next that Paul anticipates marriage will bring *'trouble of an earthly kind'* (7:28). His comment seems like a sad personal reflection rather than any statement of truth. For sure, some have trial and difficulty within marriage, but many do not. Most find that marriage with all its trials makes life complete and gives each partner fulfilment, as Jesus Himself prophesies (Matt 19:5).

General advice concerning Christian living in the End Times (7:29-32)

Next, Paul reveals the reasons for his advice about remaining focussed on the present; it is because *'time is short'* (7:29). In the first days of the church, people believed it was days or hours before Jesus returned in glory, so every second counted towards the work of the Gospel. With this in mind, Paul gives his extreme advice *'let those who have wives act as if they had none ...'* (7:29); he then challenges those who mourn, celebrate, go shopping or do business, to consider whether this is appropriate for the days before the Lord's return! Paul's words seem uncaring and disastrous, for in those days, each family depended on its head, the senior man of the family who regulated and governed its life and work. Yet we should be careful. Knowingly or unknowingly, was Paul challenging the suffocating and often destructive power of male chauvinism in the home, by calling men to give a priority to the Lord's business instead of governing family life?

Another possibility is that Paul left his own wife in order to be a missionary. This is a popular theme supported by a little ancient literature, but with no clear Biblical evidence except for this passage. Certainly, Paul equates marriage with trouble and anxiety, and in a passage of Scripture that Paul says is not about God's commands, his words may indeed reflect simply his personal experience.

Singleness, marriage and serving the Lord (7:32-35)

This small section contains some very difficult and contentious advice from Paul. He continues to say that single people in the church are to give undivided attention to the works of the Lord (7:32,33), but he adds that a married man cannot give undivided attention to the Lord because he must give some of his attention to his wife; his work for the Gospel is compromised by his *'divided'* attention (7:33,34)! Again, it is impossible to balance this with Jesus' doctrinal comments, when he says of marriage, *'for this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'* (Mat 19:5 - quoting Genesis 2:24). Now either a man and a woman are one before God or they are not, and today, we might argue that in a godly marriage there is no division of attention, and a man and woman may be united in their godly work.

But there are other cultural issues to consider here again. For where we can aspire to such a unity of man and woman in marriage, in the culture of the first century this was arguably much further from the normal experience of marriage than today. It seems Paul is being pragmatic rather than doctrinal here. His arguments for remaining single and refraining from marriage are practical and not based on the Bible's doctrines of marriage. Those who seek to interpret this passage should remember this.

The responsibilities of a father towards an unmarried daughter (7:36-38)

As we near the end of this tricky passage, Paul turns to the problems facing men whose daughters are coming to the age for marriage. Now in those days, it was his responsibility to determine the fate of his daughter, either arranging a marriage or allowing one to happen by giving his permission. Now if Paul wanted to be a strict chauvinist or disciplinarian, he would be absolute in his stance, but he is not. First, he allows a man to give his consent to a proper request for marriage; *'let him do as he wishes, it is no sin, let her marry'* (7:36); but if a daughter is young enough to be tied to his permission, then Paul commends a man for refusing to allow a marriage; *'he has the will to stand firm ...'* (7:37). This passage is a little difficult to unpick, but it seems that Paul was recommending that a father keep his daughter unmarried until she was of the age to consent to marriage herself. Without understanding more of the cultural circumstances, this seems fair advice, and certainly flew in the face of any practice of arranged marriages of young girls, a dreadful practice in any age.

The bounds of marriage (7:39-40)

Lastly, Paul offers the simple and scriptural advice that the marriage contract and vow is bound on earth but is broken by death, as Jesus Himself said (Matthew 19:1-10). Yet he adds, typical of his theme of focussing on the Lord's work, that a widow (and I dare say a widower) should accept the challenges of faith to do the Lord's work as a first priority. Yet he allows for the one who has been so freed to marry again, but only *'in the Lord'* (7:39), meaning they should only marry a believer. His own advice would be to remain dedicated to the Lord alone, but this remains advice, not law, and this is what we must remember when grappling with this whole passage.

Discipleship

Application

Singleness

There is much debate amongst God's people about the proper role of those who are single in the church, and also the place of marriage and the proper way to engage both husband and wife. It seems to me that this passage points us towards debating not so much singleness itself or marriage itself, but the way in which all people can give of their time and effort to the work of the Lord. After all, this was what taxed Paul when writing about this question in the first century.

There is true benefit in godly single people focussing their lives on the Lord's work. Throughout the generations, many have done just that, whether while holding down a full time job or not, and have benefitted from this. A Christian young person will often ask whether the Lord has 'someone' for them, and what they must do either to find this person or to be ready for him or her according to the Lord's will. The answer is simple; keep focussed on what the Lord requires, and put your effort into the Gospel, and then you will not be far away from where the Lord needs you to be to find the love of your life, if this is indeed God's will for you. If this does not happen, then you will not be disappointed, but glad to be doing God's work. This is not exactly a 'win-win' situation, but it is close!

Marriage

For those who are married, this passage holds out a fascinating set of guidelines. It does speak very strongly of the unity God intends for a man and woman in marriage, but we have found in our study that it does hint of far less male chauvinistic attitudes than we might imagine. We are reminded that although it does not seem like this to us, the Bible was comparatively feminist in its day, frequently putting women in the place of men, and warning men (as here) that their cultural power is limited. Here, a man is recommended to do God's work rather than dominate the family (7:33), and he must accept the desire of a daughter of age to marry, whatever she says (7:36). Fortunately we live in an age where the advice of Scripture, at least in some respects, is commonly accepted.

Ideas for what to do

- *Have you ever been worried about whether it is right for you to be married or not? This may be a difficult question for you to face, but it is important to face it, and this passage begs all Christians to be sure about it before committing. If you are worried about this question, I urge you to speak to someone else about it, and seek the Lord in prayer.*
- *Pray for all those who do not know what their calling in life is, and feel concerned about whether they should marry. Many young people feel this, and feel very alone when they pray about it. Do your best to stand alongside the young people in your church, to know them, and be available for them.*

Questions (for use in groups)

1. *What does this passage teach us about singleness and marriage, and how does this help God's people today?*
2. *What does Paul mean by 'anxieties' in verses 32 to 35, and can we be free of earthly worry? Compare your thoughts with what Jesus says about worry in Matthew 7.*
3. *What responsibilities do parents have today to assist their children in the matter of marriage and spiritual obligations?*

Final Prayer

Glorious Lord; You clothe us, You feed us, You give us energy, and You nurture us; but we are not babies! You do this for us so that we might grow into the full stature of those who live by faith. May we achieve the maturity of living by faith, trusting in You, and being confident of the glories of our eternal home in heaven! We praise You, glorious Lord! AMEN.