

BIBLICAL MANHOOD & WOMANHOOD VI

SINGLE AND FREE

1 Corinthians 7: 1-40

Remember to review this week's catechism question.

INTRODUCTION:

You will notice that there is a lot of reading to begin with and no questions. I'm not sure how this will go. The problem is that we need to set the context of this chapter and then there is the problem of how to translate the first verse. If you compare English translations you will see the difficulty it presents. You would also be helped if you could read 1 Corinthians 7 in Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of the New Testament titled, "The Message". I don't think he's right on every detail in the chapter but he has Paul's basic argument down very well. It might even be helpful if you read his paraphrase of the whole chapter to your group. Don't be afraid to encourage the questions that people will have but also don't be afraid to say you don't know the answer.

Discuss the cliché, "the grass is greener on the other side of the fence." What does it mean? Describe a time you were afflicted with this syndrome. Do you often wish that the circumstances of your life were different from what they are? Why or why not?

All of us sometimes believe that if only our circumstances were different we would be happier people, more Christian people. However, it does seem that single people, at least those in the church and those who are older, face greater pressure to view life in this way. Unfulfilled sexual desires and loneliness can become very heavy burdens to bear. However, the Scriptures hold a very different view, not only of singleness, but of the belief that changed circumstances will lead to greater long-term happiness. We are going to examine 1 Corinthians 7 to discover how God views singleness but more importantly how he wants all of us to live whatever the circumstances of our lives might be.

1 Corinthians 7 was not written for the purpose of describing singleness or marriage for that matter. Paul's discussion of marital status and sex is incidental to the main point of the chapter. He is seeking to correct

false teaching and the wrong living that comes from it. The church in Corinth, which existed because of Paul's preaching in that town for 2 years, was riddled with problems. He wrote a letter previous to this one (1 Cor. 5:9) and they responded to him with a letter of their own. He quotes their letter at various points (Note the quotation marks in 1 Cor. 6: 12-13 in the NIV). We are not going to discuss every verse in this chapter. Rather we are going to identify the false teaching Paul is contradicting, the principles he uses to contradict this false teaching and finally, why it is that Paul sees singleness as having certain advantages over the married state.

STUDY

Read through the entire chapter in pairs and write down questions that you have as you read it. Note points that seem confusing to you and identify why they are confusing.

Verse 1 contains our first two problems in this chapter: 1) What are the "matters" they wrote about? 2) How should the second half of verse 1 be translated? The NAS has the exact, literal translation: "It is good for a man not to touch a woman." The NIV has the two possible meanings of this strange phrase. First, it could be translated as if Paul is speaking and he is saying, "It is good for a man not to marry." But the second option is in the margin of the NIV. It could be translated as if he were quoting from their letter and so it would be enclosed in quotation marks, "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman."

There are a number of reasons why I think that Paul is quoting their letter and not expressing his own opinion about marriage. I'll just give you the main reason I think the margin of the NIV has it right and what is in the actual text is wrong. It does not seem possible to me that Paul could be saying it is good to not marry and then also to write Ephesians 5: 22-33 and especially 1 Timothy 4: 1-4 where he condemns Christian teachers who forbid marriage.

What this means is that the Corinthians had come to believe that truly spiritual Christians did not engage in sexual relations. In fact, they were teaching it was sin to engage in sexual relations at all times and in all cases. This meant that married people should not have sex and if you

couldn't control yourself you should get divorced. You can imagine the kind of chaos this brought to the lives of people.

What makes Paul's job so difficult is that it is true that it is good for certain men not to have sexual relations with certain women. Adultery is wrong. Premarital sex is sinful. Also, as Paul says at various points in this chapter singleness has certain advantages over marriage. His problem is that he agrees with their position in certain cases and for certain reasons. But he violently disagrees with the reasons they prefer celibacy and the way they apply it.

In his answer to their position Paul deals with many of the specific situations that this false teaching affected. But what is most important to see are the principles that he uses in contradicting this false teaching. You can see the principles he uses by paying attention to how he structures his argument.

In pairs skim through the chapter and note the places where Paul's subject matter changes. Where are the places he talks about things other than marital status?

- *In v. 7 he talks about people having different gifts.*
- *In vv. 17-24 he expresses a general principle, "...each one should retain the place in life that the Lord assigned to him and to which God has called him..." and then uses the Jewish/Gentile and slave/free distinction to illustrate the principle.*
- *In vv. 29-31 he talks about the time being short and then mentions married people, mourning people, happy people, people who buy things and people who use the things of this world.*

In vv. 17, 20 & 24 Paul talks about God's "call". What does he mean when he uses this phrase? What is the call of God? See 1 Cor. 1: 22-31 for the answer.

- *In vv. 22-23 how do Jews and Gentiles respond to the message of a crucified Messiah? Jews are looking for a miraculous sign to point to the Messiah and his presence and rule in the world. Greeks are looking for wisdom. The message that Jesus, hanging on the cross "is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" (Rom 1:16) is very offensive to Jewish people and foolish to wise*

Greeks. How can the Messiah, who is the king of the world be killed like a common criminal on the cross? How can a dead man do anything to gain me a relationship with God? How can a wise God use something so violent and brutal to save the world? Surely he is smarter than that?

- *According to vv. 22-23, how many Jews and Greeks view Jesus as irrelevant? There are not exceptions to this response in vv. 22-23.*
- *According to v. 24 there are some Jews and Greeks who view Jesus as the power and wisdom of God. How did they come to view him this way? Paul says they were "called" by God. He says the same thing in v. 26. Then in v. 27-28 he talks about God choosing some to save. Then in v. 30 he says that everyone who is "in" Christ is in that condition because of the work of God.*
- *According to vv. 29 & 31 why has God saved people by choosing them and calling them? He does it this way so that no one will ever be able to say their salvation is in any part due to their effort. It is so that people will boast in God alone. He gets the praise, we get the benefit.*
- *Historically, Christians have named this "call" of God his "effectual call". In other words God gives to people what he commands. He commands all to repent and to believe the good news and he gives some who hear this "general call" the ability to do what he is requiring. As our catechism asks and answers, "What is the effectual call of God?" "The effectual call of God is a work of the Holy Spirit, who convinces us that we are sinful and miserable, who enlightens our minds in the knowledge of Christ and who renews our will. He thus persuades and enables us to embrace Jesus Christ, who is freely offered to us in the gospel."*

According to vv. 17-24 what else did God do besides enabling these people to embrace Jesus Christ?

He also assigned them to the circumstances they are living in. If they are Jewish it is because God made them Jewish. If they are not Jewish it is because God made them Gentile. If they are slaves it is because God has assigned slavery to them. If they are free it is because God has assigned them to be free. It is no accident that you are widowed or married to a non-Christian or living in the family you are living in. It is not an accident that you have the job you have, live in the house you live in. These circumstances are the place the Lord assigned to you and the

circumstances he wants you to live out your Christian life in. As we're going to see in a minute Paul is not forbidding changing the circumstances of your life. We're not fatalists. Rather, he is assuring each of us that the God who loved us and gave his son for us and sent his Holy Spirit to us, is in control of the details of our lives and we ought not to chafe under them thinking there is a better life to be had through other circumstances.

What difference does it make to you to know this?

God not only makes people Christians but places them in the circumstances in which they must live like Christians

According to v. 19, if the circumstances of your life do not matter, then what does?

Obeying God's commands is what matters, not whether you are married or not married, slave or free, professional or blue-collar, black or white, rich or poor.

How do you feel about Paul telling slaves to not let their slavery trouble them? Is he being cold and insensitive? Is he in favor of slavery?

According to vv. 21-23, why should a Christian who is a slave not let it trouble him or her?

Paul's point is that compared to being set free from sin and hell, slavery is nothing. Being a slave cannot prevent you from knowing the freedom and joy of belonging to Christ. Being set free from your sin and the condemnation of sin is far better than being a free person and being a slave cannot keep you from experiencing that freedom.

How should a person who is not a slave, i.e. a "freedman", relate to Christ?

If you are not a slave but a free person do not find your hope and joy and pleasure in being free. Rather, be happy that you are Christ's slave. The highest good in life is to be Christ's slave, not to be free from slavery. To live with Christ as your master, only doing what he commands and living only for his pleasure is far greater joy than being

free to travel where you want, work when you want and doing what you want.

How does this contradict what the false teachers in Corinth were telling the church?

They were teaching that your marital status and your sexual activity determined whether or not you could know and love God. The external circumstances of life determined whether you could know Jesus. However, Paul, by referring to religious status and class status shows that the external circumstances of life have nothing to do with knowing and loving God. You should not be concerned with your status but seek Christ.

What circumstances in your life are "troubling" you? Do these circumstances prevent you from knowing and loving Christ?

Living as a Christian is all that matters because being a Christian is the best thing that can ever happen to you.

In vv. 17, 20 & 24 Paul tells them to remain in the condition they were in when they became a Christian. How do we know that Paul was not making an absolute prohibition on ever changing your circumstances?

- *In v. 9 he tells the unmarried to get married*
- *In v. 21 he tells slaves to gain their freedom if they can legally do so.*
- *In vv. 28 & 36 he tells unmarried virgins that they are not sinning if they get married. They can marry if they want.*
- *In v. 39 he tells widows they may get married if they want to.*

So why does he tell people to stay in the condition they are in?

Paul's main concern is with their motive. They should never change their situation if the reason they are doing so is that they believe they cannot be good Christians unless...they are married...unless they are single...unless they are free...unless whatever. The false teachers are saying you cannot be a good Christian and be married. Paul is saying that has nothing to do with being a Christian, just like being Jewish or being Gentile has nothing to do with being a Christian.

How does Paul contradict the idea that your social, religious or economic status determines you standing with God?

He says that both celibate singleness and sexually active marriage are gifts from God.

What does he mean by declaring your marital status a gift from God?

He recognizes that the reason he is single, celibate and happy is because God, by his grace, is enabling him to be so. He knows God has put him in this circumstance and that God is giving him all he needs to be happy in these circumstances. He also knows that his friends that are married, sexually active and faithfully following Christ are doing so as a result of God's gracious gift to them.

How does it help you to know that your current marital status, job situation, economic status, etc. is a gift from God?

This means I'm right where God wants me and that I have everything I need, in Christ, to be a happy Christian. Nothing needs to change in my circumstances in order for me to know and love God.

Do you ever envy others because of the circumstances of their life? Do you ever think that you are closer to God because of the situation you live in, i.e., you marital status, job, economic status, health condition?

Don't change your circumstances or status because you think you'll be a better Christian. God gives everything necessary for living as a Christian, no matter the circumstances.

Having said all this it is apparent that Paul does believe that celibate singleness has some advantage over marriage. Read vv. 7a, 8, 26, 28, 38 & 40 to see this. Let's look at vv. 25-35 to see what it is about singleness that makes it advantageous.

In vv. 26 & 28 what two reasons does he give for remaining single?

The present crisis and the troubles married people face in this life.

Notice that v. 29 begins with, "What I mean, brothers, is that the time is short". Therefore, the "present crisis" and "the troubles of the married" have something to do with the shortness of the time. What is he talking about in vv. 29-31?

It would seem that he is talking about the fact that, for the Christian, this world is not our home. The time is short until we will be in our eternal home. This world that we are living in is only temporary and will soon be replaced by our eternal home in heaven, enjoying God. Notice how he does not limit his discussion to just married or single people. He addresses the "brothers", i.e. all the Christians in the church no matter their condition. He addresses husbands, those who mourn, those who are happy, those who buy things, those that are using the things of this world. In other words he is referring to a reality that is to affect every Christian. This world is not our home and therefore we must live in it as if it is only temporary. We must not live as if our happiness depends upon this world. When we mourn, we should mourn in a way that shows that we know this sadness we feel is not the final word. When we are happy we should be happy in a way that shows that our final hope of happiness is not in this world but in the next. We should buy things to use but not because we must have them to be happy. We need to live as if we are camping. It's right to use our tent and camp stove but we don't use them as if we expect to live this way forever. We know the campsite is only temporary. We don't bring all our furniture along. We only bring what we need and we enjoy our stay but we know the tent isn't our house. We don't get bent out of shape about dirt or disorder the way we would at home, because we know it's temporary.

In vv. 32-35 how does marriage affect your ability to live as if this world is not your home, but heaven is?

Just like it is easier to go camping as a single person, so it is easier to live as if heaven is your home when you are single simply because it is simpler to live. There are more pressures on the married person to build a "home" on planet earth rather than to live for your home that is in heaven. Both single and married Christians are to live as if this world is not our home. But the fact is that single people have more time and fewer distractions to fix their attention on heaven. Being single does not automatically guarantee you will do that, but for two people

who are equally intent on pursuing their home in heaven, the one married and the other single, the single person has some advantages due time and fewer distractions.

How often do you think of your life here as only temporary and your life in heaven as your true home?

Has the knowledge that this is not your home ever changed what you bought or how you spent your time?

If you are single, can you see how your singleness gives you certain advantages in seeking heaven as your home?

The gift of celibate singleness, in view of the shortness of this life, has unique advantages for loving and serving God