



1 Corinthians - Chapter Seven

Summary of Chapter Seven

The letter to date shows there were some in Corinth who were for casting off all moral constraint, whereas there were some stating there should be extreme moral severity. Paul commences the chapter by indicating that abstinence from sexual intercourse is a good thing. However, those who are married should enjoy a healthy sexual relationship with each other. Celibacy for the single and sexual pleasure within marriage are both gifts from God to the individual.

Paul then moves on to the issue of divorce, reminding them that it was ordained by God that marriage was a lifelong commitment and that couples should remain together. If they do separate they should remain single. He continues by teaching that, if a believer is married to an unbeliever and they are happy together, then they should remain married, but if the unbeliever chooses to leave then the other person has no obligation to invite them back.

Paul informs the church that the social status of a person does not matter; what is important is that they have been called into God's service.

The theme of the letter then returns to marital status, with Paul stating that people should remain as they presently were, married or unmarried, although he does say that anyone who is betrothed to be married can do so, warning that it will produce problems for them on a personal level. He gives this opinion because he knows that the world is about to change and all the former ways will pass. Whether he was referring to the Day of Judgement or the severe famine caused by a grain shortage throughout the Roman Empire is unclear.

The chapter concludes by Paul outlining how the pressures that married people face can deflect them from their service to God. He writes that, if it is within the personal will to do so, then it is better for the unmarried to remain that way. However, if they do choose to marry, it should be to another believer, and that would be an acceptable thing.

When a woman becomes a widow she is free in law to marry again. However, Paul believed that it would be better for her not to do so.

IV. 1 Corinthians 7:1-11:1 - Three Issues from a Corinthian Letter

Paul now turned to a series of problems raised in a letter from the Corinthians that had been written to him (7:1). He signals a move from one topic to another with the phrase 'now concerning' (7:1, 7:25, and 8:1); the phrase also occurs later at 12:1, 16:1, and 16:12.

Paul first addresses issues related to marriage, divorce, and one's lot in life (7:1-24). He then turns to whether the betrothed and widowed should marry in light of the urgency of the times (7:25-40). Finally, he discusses food sacrificed to idols, an issue that is not just for those of a Jewish background (8:1-11:1).

IV.a 1 Corinthians 7:1-24 - Marriage, divorce, and unchangeable circumstances

The Corinthians were commanded to be faithful in their marriages, to avoid divorce, and to be content in their calling by God, whatever their social status.

IV.a.i 1 Corinthians 7:1-16 - Directions concerning Marriage

Although remaining single and celibate is a gift from God, so are the pleasures of a normal sexual relationship within marriage. Neither the man nor the woman owns their own bodies; they are there for the pleasure of each other.

Paul teaches that divorce was not part of God's plan for his people and that married couples should endeavour not to separate. If they do, they should remain single. He adds that it is perfectly acceptable for a believer to remain with an unbelieving spouse if the latter is happy to remain, but that if they should leave then the believer is under no obligation to seek reconciliation.

¹ Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: 'It is well for a man not to touch a woman.'

1 Corinthians 7:1

Now concerning. Paul uses this phrase for the first time here to signal a switch from matters raised in the oral report from Chloe's people in 1 Corinthians 1:10-11, to issues raised in a letter from Corinth, the matters about which you wrote. This same phrase is repeated in a number of places throughout the rest of 1 Corinthians, where it introduces additional topics from the Corinthians' letter.

'It is well for a man not to touch a woman'. Again, the quotation marks indicate this was probably an adopted slogan in the Corinthian culture, although it was almost certainly a direct quote within the letter he had received from them. Some Corinthian Christians appear to have adopted the view that sexual relations of any kind, even within marriage, should be avoided. Paul seeks to carefully refute this view throughout this chapter.

² But because of cases of sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband.

1 Corinthians 7:2

Because of cases of sexual immorality. The Greco-Roman culture and the lifestyle in a vibrant sea port led to a lack of morality within the community. To avoid the temptation to sin in this way, Paul advises the Corinthians to marry in order to provide for their physical desires.

Have his own wife refers to sexual intercourse: <<*It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife*>> (1 Corinthians 5:1 ESV). The phrase here is not a command that everyone should be married, for Paul uses the term have and *has* as a polite term for sexual relations.

Each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband affirms the goodness of a monogamous marriage and excludes polygamy, for a shared husband would not be her own husband. Anything outside of such a union would be considered as sexual immorality.

³ The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband.

1 Corinthians 7:3

The husband, the wife. God designed marriage as the place for the expression of human sexuality. Sex within marriage has both relational and spiritual benefits: <<*For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh*>> (Ephesians 5:31), which is based on Genesis 2:24 and was commented on in 1 Corinthians 6:17. It also has the practical benefit of reducing the temptation to engage in sexual sin. Refer to v.2 and v.9.

Cephas' teaching, popular among the Corinthians, agrees with Paul, although he wrote from a different perspective: <<*Husbands, in the same way, show consideration for your wives in your life together, paying honour to the woman as the weaker sex, since they too are also heirs of the gracious gift of life – so that nothing may hinder your prayers*>> (1 Peter 3:7).

Her conjugal rights. This was enshrined in the law during an era when polygamy was still being practised: <<*If he takes another wife to himself, he shall not diminish the food, clothing, or marital rights of the first wife*>> (Exodus 21:10). However, Paul's teaching is not being legalistic.

⁴ For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does.

1 Corinthians 7:4

The wife does not, the husband does not. The emphasis here is on mutuality in the marriage relationship within the overall framework described in: <<*Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Saviour*>> (Ephesians 5:22-23), and: <<*Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is*

fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and never treat them harshly>> (Colossians 3:18-19).

This is a stunning statement for equality between the two genders, negating the claims by some that Paul disliked women and saw them as inferior, something that was culturally the norm but Jesus had demonstrated that he was more than prepared to interact with all people on an equal basis. This was according to the created order of things: <<*This is the list of the descendants of Adam. When God created humankind, he made them in the likeness of God. Male and female he created them, and he blessed them and named them 'Humankind' when they were created*>> (Genesis 5:1-2).

⁵ Do not deprive one another except perhaps by agreement for a set time, to devote yourselves to prayer, and then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.

1 Corinthians 7:5

Do not deprive one another. Abstention from sexual relations in marriage should be limited to short periods of time and only by mutual consent of the husband and wife, i.e. except perhaps by agreement. King David insisted that he and his men abstain from sex just before going out especially when they went to fight battles in the name of God: <<*The priest answered David, 'I have no ordinary bread at hand, only holy bread – provided that the young men have kept themselves from women.'* David answered the priest, 'Indeed, women have been kept from us as always when I go on an expedition; the vessels of the young men are holy even when it is a common journey; how much more today will their vessels be holy?'>> (1 Samuel 21:4-5).

Paul gives one good reason for abstinence as being to devote yourselves to prayer. This would fit into the same category as prayer and fasting. This statement does not give rise to the suggestion that abstinence from sex heightens a person's spirituality. It does however give them time to focus on matters outside of the day-to-day aspects of normal married life. Once the agreed period has passed they should come together again, i.e. enjoy the physical pleasures.

Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control alludes to the fact that some people will turn to someone else for their sexual gratification if they are not being satisfied within their marriage. Satan had of course tried to tempt even Jesus and was severely rebuked for doing so: <<*Jesus said to him, 'Away with you, Satan! for it is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him"'*>> (Matthew 4:10). Paul had been concerned that he would tempt other churches too: <<*For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith; I was afraid that somehow the tempter had tempted you and that our labour had been in vain*>> (1 Thessalonians 3:5).

⁶ This I say by way of concession, not of command. ⁷ I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has a particular gift from God, one having one kind and another a different kind.

1 Corinthians 7:6-7

The concession refers to permission to refrain from sexual relations for short periods of time, see v.5. Paul does not demand such periods of abstinence, although he does permit it. This is in line with other aspects of the letter. There are instructions for life that Paul does give as a command and others that are not compulsory, simply advisory. He based his teaching on his pastoral gifts and experiences gained throughout his ministry.

Paul writes in similar fashion with regard to commands and concessions in his final letter to Corinth. This had a particular purpose in mind: *<<I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others>>* (2 Corinthians 8:8).

Each has a particular gift. Both marriage and celibacy have their own benefits, and both should be considered as gifts. Paul is happy that God has given him the gift of being content with remaining unmarried, since this permits single-minded devotion to the Lord's work (vv.32-33 and v.40). Paul recognises, however, that his situation is not the norm. Remaining unmarried is a gift that many others do not have: *<<For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can>>* (Matthew 19:12).

It is based on some of the principles that Paul teaches that a decision was made in some church traditions that those serving the church were to remain unmarried and celibate.

One having one kind and another a different kind. Later in the letter Paul will list some of the different types of gift, although the list is not exclusive: *<<To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues>>* (1 Corinthians 12:8-10).

⁸ To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well for them to remain unmarried as I am. ⁹ But if they are not practising self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion.

1 Corinthians 7:8-9

To the unmarried. Paul starts with a message to those who are no longer married, for that seems to be the better translation of the phrase than to those who had never married. Paul deals with such people later in the chapter.

Widows were encouraged to seek a husband as soon as possible following the death of their husbands, mainly because they would find it almost impossible to survive financially without a husband, unless their father or a brother would take them in. In teaching them to remain unmarried, Paul was laying down a challenge,
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not just to the individual, but to the whole Christian community, for they would then need to care for such widows. It was also socially subversive, even shocking, to suggest such a thing in the culture of the day. On another occasion he recognised that for the younger widows getting remarried was probably the better option: <<*So I would have younger widows marry, bear children, and manage their households, so as to give the adversary no occasion to revile us*>> (1 Timothy 5:14).

Not practising self-control. Paul encourages those who are content to remain unmarried to continue as they are. However, those not practising self-control were living in sin by having sexual intercourse outside of marriage, or at least were likely to be tempted by such sin, bringing harm upon themselves and damaging the reputation of the church. It should be noted however that Paul is not saying that the only reason for marriage is to avoid fornication!

Unmarried as I am. Paul confirms that he was a bachelor; although the term would also allow for him to have been a widower or divorcee, and that he was quite content to remain celibate, clearly having the self-control to do so. It allowed him to focus on his work for Christ without having any responsibilities outside of his apostolic duties.

The phrase translated aflame with passion was originally translated as burn and many believed it to mean ‘burn in hell’ because of sexual immorality. However, the more modern translations show that it is about the temptation to sin that would come into the lives of many who did not have the self-control to remain celibate.

¹⁰ To the married I give this command – not I but the Lord – that the wife should not separate from her husband ¹¹ (but if she does separate, let her remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband should not divorce his wife.

1 Corinthians 7:10-11

Paul now turns to divorce and urges believers to obey the command of the Lord: <<*But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery*>> (Matthew 5:32), <<*And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another commits adultery*>> (Matthew 19:9), <<*He said to them, ‘Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery’*>> (Mark 10:11-12), and: <<*Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and whoever marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery*>> (Luke 16:18), that the wife should not separate from, Greek *chōrizō*, which is the same word used in: <<*So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate*>> (Matthew 19:6), a believing husband, and that the husband should not divorce, Greek *aphiēmi*, literally ‘send away’, which is a term commonly used for divorce, a believing wife. Roman law permitted either a husband or a wife to initiate a divorce with no stated cause required, although the Jewish tradition only allowed a man to divorce his wife.

The 1st Century Roman world, including Palestine, was much like the 21st Century western world when it came to attitudes concerning marriage fidelity and related morality. Even within the Jewish leadership there was a tendency in some schools of thought to allow divorce for any reason at all, using the Law of Moses to support their actions. Refer to the comments made on Acts 5:34 for the teachings of the schools of Shammai, Hillel and Gamaliel. Jesus would teach them differently: <<*They said, 'Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her.'* But Jesus said to them, '*Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you*>> (Mark 10:4-5).

¹² To the rest I say – I and not the Lord – that if any believer has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. ¹³ And if any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him.

1 Corinthians 7:12-13

I and not the Lord. Paul knows the oral tradition of Jesus' sayings on divorce that were later written down in the Gospels, and which were used to support the comments on vv.10-11. However, he was not aware that Jesus ever spoke specifically to a situation in which one spouse becomes a Christian and the other remains unconverted. He carefully distinguishes, therefore, between the spoken words of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels and Paul's own understanding of how Jesus' teaching would apply to this new situation. After all, there was much more to Jesus' teaching than that recorded in Scripture: <<*But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written*>> (John 21:25). Paul views his admonition here as authoritative and inspired, not merely as human wisdom: <<*Anyone who claims to be a prophet, or to have spiritual powers, must acknowledge that what I am writing to you is a command of the Lord. Anyone who does not recognise this is not to be recognised*>> (1 Corinthians 14:37-38).

A wife or a husband who is an unbeliever. Is the believing partner defiled by being married to and having sexual relations with an unbeliever? Should they divorce? Clearly the believing partner is not defiled, for Paul says that if the believing partner has any say in the matter, they should not divorce.

A good analogy to what Paul is teaching is given in the examples where Jesus made physical contact with uncleanness such as touching a leper or a corpse and, instead of becoming unclean as the law said would happen, he overcame and cured the uncleanness. This demonstrates that the power of God is far greater than anything else. An unbelieving spouse would therefore more likely become saved through being in the presence of God's Spirit through the believing partner, than a believer becoming defiled through potential contact with pagan practices and influences.

¹⁴ For the unbelieving husband is made holy through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy through her husband. Otherwise, your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.

1 Corinthians 7:14

Is made holy, they are holy. These are the same terms, Greek *hagiazō* and *hagios*, used earlier for God's separation of Corinthian Christians from their pagan environment as his special people.

The unbelieving spouse and children in a family with a believing spouse are not saved by this association (v.16), but they do come under the believing spouse's Christian influence and so, Paul notes, they are much more likely to be saved in due course through their own faith. Thus they are in a real sense 'set apart', the basic meaning of *hagiazō* and *hagios*, from other unbelievers and from the evil of the world. Thus the positive spiritual and moral influence of the believing parent outweighs the negative influence of the unbelieving parent.

The prophet confirms that one purpose of marriage was to provide children that would serve God: <<Did not one God make her? Both flesh and spirit are his. And what does the one God desire? Godly offspring. So look to yourselves, and do not let anyone be faithless to the wife of his youth>> (Malachi 2:15).

As just stated, a child of a believer is not automatically saved by that fact; they must at some stage come to faith through their own heart-felt decision. There is a difference of opinion within the church as to whether children are saved through infant baptism or come under the umbrella of Christ until they reach an age where they can make a decision for themselves.

¹⁵ But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so; in such a case the brother or sister is not bound. It is to peace that God has called you.

1 Corinthians 7:15

Let it be so. Paul advises the Christian spouse not to create strife by trying to manipulate reconciliation with an unbelieving spouse who has left the marriage. Since it should be the unbelieving partner who leaves or separates then there is no requirement for the believing partner to try to bring the other back.

Not bound. This at least means that the believing spouse is not obligated to seek reconciliation to the unbelieving spouse who abandoned him or her; but the majority of interpreters now think that the phrase also implies the freedom to obtain a legal divorce, if that has not already happened, and the freedom to marry someone else. Jesus' teaching on divorce also appears to allow remarriage when sexual immorality has prompted the divorce, although his teaching on this does not automatically exclude other potential reasons, such as violence and desertion.

Peace in the widest sense is meant, in the OT sense that 'all is well' in one's life and circumstances, which is the OT concept of *shalom*. Paul intimates that here: <<Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual edification>>

(Romans 14:19). Most interpreters hold that God releases the believing spouse from the twin unending distresses of:

- a. A lifelong vain hope of reconciling with an unbeliever who has abandoned the believing spouse.
- b. A lifelong prohibition against enjoying the blessings of marriage again.

Other interpreters, emphasising v.39, hold that remarriage is never allowed after divorce proceedings, irrespective of fault or reason.

¹⁶ Wife, for all you know, you might save your husband. Husband, for all you know, you might save your wife.

1 Corinthians 7:16

For all you know. Paul probably intends a negative answer to these rhetorical questions, i.e. that there is no assurance that an unbelieving spouse will be saved, and so the believer should feel free not to pursue the spouse who has left. However, in its positive sense, it is also a good reason for a mixed marriage not to separate if the couple are content to stay together.

You might save your husband is something that Peter believes a wife who has faith can achieve: <<*Wives, in the same way, accept the authority of your husbands, so that, even if some of them do not obey the word, they may be won over without a word by their wives' conduct*>> (1 Peter 3:1).

IV.a.ii 1 Corinthians 7:17-24 - The Life That the Lord Has Assigned

The following verses are all about accepting one's calling irrespective of one's worldly status. It does not matter if a person is a Jew or Gentile, a slave or is free, for all are called into the service of God as they are.

Paul's point is not to teach on the specific issues of circumcision or slavery as such, but to use them as illustrations for the wider message that he is trying to get across in this lengthy chapter. That is, how male and female issues are supposed to work out within the Christian community.

¹⁷ However that may be, let each of you lead the life that the Lord has assigned, to which God called you. This is my rule in all the churches.

1 Corinthians 7:17

God calls people to himself who are in various situations regarding economics (slavery or freedom), family (divorce or marriage), and religious background (circumcision or uncircumcision), and often God has a purpose for the new believer in that very situation. It is the place to which God has called him, Greek *kaleō*; the idea of life vocation as a 'calling' comes from this verse. Paul couples this word with assigned, Greek *merizō*, which can also be translated 'deal out' or 'apportion'.

Elsewhere, Paul illustrates the fundamental truths of Christianity: <<*There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer*

male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus>> (Galatians 3:28). In essence, Paul is restating that here.

¹⁸ Was anyone at the time of his call already circumcised? Let him not seek to remove the marks of circumcision. Was anyone at the time of his call uncircumcised? Let him not seek circumcision.

1 Corinthians 7:18

Circumcised. Although Jews were not the only Semitic people who practiced male circumcision, Greeks, Romans, and the Jews themselves considered the practice a distinguishing characteristic of the Jews. There were some supposed Christian teachers who had gone out to places like Antioch and Galatia stating that people needed to be circumcised before coming to faith in Jesus: *<<Then certain individuals came down from Judæa and were teaching the brothers, ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.’ And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders>> (Acts 15:1-2).* This visit was the occasion of the Jerusalem Council where it was ruled conclusively that circumcision was not required by Christians.

Remove the marks of circumcision. This verb, Greek *epispaō*, describes *epispasm*, a procedure that reversed the physical appearance of circumcision.

¹⁹ Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing; but obeying the commandments of God is everything. ²⁰ Let each of you remain in the condition in which you were called.

1 Corinthians 7:19-20

God’s command that his people should practice male circumcision as a sign of his covenant with them, as given in Genesis 17:1-14, had passed away, just like the Mosaic law’s dietary restrictions: *<<it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles>> (Matthew 15:11), <<He said to them, ‘Then do you also fail to understand? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?’ (Thus he declared all foods clean)>> (Mark 7:18-19), <<Then he heard a voice saying, ‘Get up, Peter; kill and eat’>> (Acts 10:13), repeated again in: <<I also heard a voice saying to me, “Get up, Peter; kill and eat”>> (Acts 11:7), with confirmation of the removal of circumcision requirements found in: <<For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything!>> (Galatians 6:15).* However, God still had **commandments** for his people to keep: *<<To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law) so that I might win those outside the law>> (1 Corinthians 9:21), the purpose being to: <<Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ>> (Galatians 6:2).*

Obeying the commandments of God is everything. Greek men would frequently bathe or exercise naked and any Jews who wished to be part of their culture felt pressured to change their appearance to fit in. Likewise, as seen in Galatians, Gentiles who wanted to associate with a synagogue were pressured into becoming circumcised. Paul demonstrates that such social pressures should be removed, for it is obedience to God that is really of importance.

²¹ Were you a slave when called? Do not be concerned about it. Even if you can gain your freedom, make use of your present condition now more than ever.

1 Corinthians 7:21

A slave when called. The Roman institution of being a slave or bondservant, Greek *doulos*, was different from the institution of slavery in North America and Europe during the 17th to 19th centuries.

In the Greco-Roman world slaves, bondservants and servants were generally permitted to work for pay and to save enough to buy their freedom. Many were given positions of influence and trust in the family home or business: *<<For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away>>* (Matthew 25:14-15), which shows that the slaves, again Greek *doulos*, were entrusted with immense amounts of money and responsibility.

The NT assumes that trafficking in human beings is a sin: *<<This means understanding that the law is laid down not for the innocent but for the lawless and disobedient, for the godless and sinful, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their father or mother, for murderers, fornicators, sodomites, slave-traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching>>* (1 Timothy 1:9-10), *<<And the merchants of the earth weep and mourn for her, since no one buys their cargo any more, cargo of gold, silver, jewels and pearls, fine linen, purple, silk and scarlet, all kinds of scented wood, all articles of ivory, all articles of costly wood, bronze, iron, and marble, cinnamon, spice, incense, myrrh, frankincense, wine, olive oil, choice flour and wheat, cattle and sheep, horses and chariots, slaves – and human lives>>* (Revelation 18:11-13), and Paul urges Christian bondservants who can gain freedom to do so.

This refutes the claim of some that the phrase: make use of your present condition now more than ever should be read as 'remain as slaves in order to serve God's purpose'. If offered freedom a slave should take it and Paul even asked Philemon to consider setting his former runaway slave free: *<<Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back for ever, no longer as a slave but as more than a slave, a beloved brother – especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord>>* (Philemon 15-16). In both cases, Paul does not dwell on the issues of slavery and it is not right to make suppositions about what he may or may not have really thought of their personal situations or slavery as a whole.

The released bondservant was officially designated a 'freedman' and frequently continued to work for his former master. Many extant inscriptions from freedmen indicate the tendency to adopt the family name of their former master, now their patron, and to continue honouring them.

There have been many people critical of Paul's apparent lax attitude to slavery. However, they have failed to grasp what Paul was really saying. Slaves were part of the fabric of society and any attempt to abolish slavery or incite them to rise up against their masters would not have just led to protests against the church but probably to open warfare. What Paul is really saying is that, compared to the freedom that they have in Christ, then slavery becomes less of an issue and a slave should not spend each waking hour contemplating a way out of their situation. Instead, they should focus on the life they now have through the offer of eternal salvation.

²² For whoever was called in the Lord as a slave is a freed person belonging to the Lord, just as whoever was free when called is a slave of Christ. ²³ You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of human masters. ²⁴ In whatever condition you were called, brothers and sisters, there remain with God.

1 Corinthians 7:22-24

You were bought with a price refers to the blood of Jesus and was discussed in comments made on 1 Corinthians 6:20. Therefore, all who follow Jesus are to be considered as a slave of Christ because of the sacrifice he made to purchase them.

A slave is a freed person belonging to the Lord. Jesus is no respecter of a person's rank or status. He has accepted all who turn to God by calling on his name: <<*Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved*>> (Acts 2:21). Jesus had taught that all his followers were free: <<*Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, 'If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free'*>> (John 8:31-32), going on to say: <<*So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed*>> (John 8:36). This is precisely the situation for a believing slave.

Do not become slaves of human masters. It was quite common for people to either sell themselves or other members of their family into slavery in order to pay off debts or because they were unable to care for themselves for some reason.

IV.b 1 Corinthians 7:25-40 - The Unmarried and the Widows

Paul now turns to those eligible for marriage and discusses the advisability of marriage in times of distress. He gives a personal opinion that it would be wise for people to remain as they presently were for the world order was about to change.

In the case of widows, his advice is to remain single. Yet Paul realises that they are free to marry if that is the choice they wish to make.

²⁵ Now concerning virgins, I have no command of the Lord, but I give my opinion as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy.

1 Corinthians 7:25

Now concerning virgins translates the Greek plural of *parthenos*. Although the term could apply to either men or women, it most often applied to women of marriageable age who had never married. Paul's use of the term in v.28 is clearly feminine, so he probably has women in mind here as well. In light of what he says later in vv.36-38, it seems clear that his comments in vv.25-26 are directed to any man who has promised to marry a virgin; that is, he is betrothed to a young girl.

Paul was well placed to give his opinion because he had been anointed by the Lord's mercy and was in a position to give several trustworthy statements: <<*Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the worst*>> (1 Timothy 1:15 NIV), <<*Here is a trustworthy saying: Whoever aspires to be an overseer desires a noble task*>> (1 Timothy 3:1 NIV), <<*For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come. This is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance*>> (1 Timothy 4:8-9 NIV), <<*Here is a trustworthy saying: If we died with him, we will also live with him*>> (2 Timothy 2:11 NIV), and: <<*This is a trustworthy saying. And I want you to stress these things, so that those who have trusted in God may be careful to devote themselves to doing what is good. These things are excellent and profitable for everyone*>> (Titus 3:8 NIV).

²⁶ I think that, in view of the impending crisis, it is well for you to remain as you are. ²⁷ Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife.

1 Corinthians 7:26-27

The impending crisis. This may refer to the urgency of living in the last days, for Paul was convinced that Christ would return soon; or to some difficulty that may have been afflicting Corinth at that time. It is known that shortly after Paul left Corinth in AD51, there was a severe grain shortage in the Roman Empire, particularly in the region of Greece. This caused a lot of hardship, especially to the poor and most of Corinth's church were in that category.

Remain as you are. It should be remembered that this is advice from Paul and not a commandment. It appears he wanted his readers to focus on getting their lives right as they were, especially with regard to the relationship with God, and not to be deflected by the pressures that naturally come with a change of marital status.

²⁸ But if you marry, you do not sin, and if a virgin marries, she does not sin. Yet those who marry will experience distress in this life, and I would spare you that.

1 Corinthians 7:28

But if you marry. On deciding whether to marry, refer to Paul's comments about the particular gifts of marriage and celibacy made in comments on vv.6-7. In the cultural context young girls were usually betrothed well before the age of puberty, and it would be around the age of 12 when a girl was often expected to

consummate the marriage and start to bear children. Paul was saying that the economic climate was unfavourable for starting married life and the need to get one's relationship right with God was far more important than the social pressures that come with a new family life. This would inevitably cause problems for individuals and with compassion Paul writes I would spare you that.

²⁹ I mean, brothers and sisters, the appointed time has grown short; from now on, let even those who have wives be as though they had none, ³⁰ and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no possessions, ³¹ and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away.

1 Corinthians 7:29-31

The appointed time has grown short. Paul is not saying, as some scholars have claimed, that Christ would definitely come within the Corinthians' lifetimes, even though he knew he should expect him to. It might be better to translate this passage as 'the world as it is will not last forever'.

A key purpose of 1 Corinthians is to encourage Christians to attend to the kinds of daily affairs that would be unimportant if Christ were returning within weeks or months. Thus Paul provides practical teaching concerning marriage (vv.1-16 and vv.25-40); what type of food to eat at a dinner party (10:23-11:1); collecting money for the needy (16:1-4); and future travel plans (16:5-11). Like other NT writers, Paul considers all of time from the Cross forward to be 'the last days': <<*In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams*>> (Acts 2:17), <<*but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds*>> (Hebrews 1:2), and: <<*Your gold and silver have rusted, and their rust will be evidence against you, and it will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure for the last days*>> (James 5:3); and counsels Christians always to live in the light of Christ's certain return at an unforeseen moment: <<*Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour*>> (Matthew 24:44), <<*Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour*>> (Matthew 25:13), and: <<*the work of each builder will become visible, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each has done*>> (1 Corinthians 3:13). This is further confirmed in Scriptures, such as Mark 13:32-37, Luke 21:34-36, Romans 13:11-14, 1 Corinthians 15:52, and 1 Thessalonians 5:1-9.

Paul's point here is simply that the present form of this world, with its day-to-day affairs, are not eternal. Christians should prioritise their human relationships, material possessions, and worldly dealings accordingly: <<*For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and*

swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man>> (Matthew 24:37-39), confirmed in Luke 17:26-30; the need for a new mindset: <<*Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect*>> (Romans 12:2), and: <<*for all that is in the world – the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the pride in riches – comes not from the Father but from the world. And the world and its desire are passing away, but those who do the will of God live for ever*>> (1 John 2:16-17).

³² I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord; ³³ but the married man is anxious about the affairs of the world, how to please his wife, ³⁴ and his interests are divided. And the unmarried woman and the virgin are anxious about the affairs of the Lord, so that they may be holy in body and spirit; but the married woman is anxious about the affairs of the world, how to please her husband. ³⁵ I say this for your own benefit, not to put any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and unhindered devotion to the Lord.

1 Corinthians 7:32-35

I want you to be free from anxieties. This is not a passage that demonstrates Paul was opposed to marriage except for those who could not control their sexual urges, and thereby a means of avoiding fornication. If it were, it would not make sense with what Paul had written at the beginning of the chapter or elsewhere. Paul's concern was over divided loyalties in the church and the pressures that could create for individuals trying to meet the requirements of serving God and serving the needs of their spouse, family, community and other external pressures.

Paul is not saying it is impossible for someone to be married and fulfil their calling for he knew many married Christians, including Priscilla, Aquila and the apostle Peter, who were very successful at both. However, as Paul had already indicated, times were hard and this was not a good time to be embarking on a new family life. People might find it difficult to meet the needs of the Gospel and their spouse equally well in such times, and Paul felt he was offering them a reasonable solution.

As in most of the chapter, Paul is not laying down hard and fast rules. He is trying to teach the Corinthians to think clearly, wisely and above all Christianly about delicate issues where there is no absolute right and wrong.

The unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord. On living as a single person, refer to comments on vv.6-7. Paul reveals that he had anxieties for all the churches: <<*And, besides other things, I am under daily pressure because of my anxiety for all the churches*>> (2 Corinthians 11:28). There are times when Paul teaches that all such anxieties can be handed over to God: <<*Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God*>> (Philippians 4:6). At other times, such as here, he is teaching that people need to think carefully and

work through the issues before embarking on a certain course of action that could cause them unnecessary problems.

So that they may be holy in body and spirit. Again, Paul is not indicating that remaining single and celibate itself makes a person more righteous or holy. What he is indicating is that it is a state that allows a person more time to dedicate themselves to God's service, if that is what they are called to do.

Tom Wright concludes: 'This isn't a way of saying that the Lord helps those who help themselves. But it is a way of reminding God's people that when we pray for something, part of the answer to the prayer may be some action that lies in our own power to do or not to do. There is no point in praying for safety on the road while continuing to drive dangerously'.

³⁶ If anyone thinks that he is not behaving properly towards his fiancée, if his passions are strong, and so it has to be, let him marry as he wishes; it is no sin. Let them marry.

1 Corinthians 7:36

If anyone thinks that he is not behaving properly. Until now, Paul has been careful to address his comments to both men and women with regard to the issues over marriage. Here, he focuses solely on the man. Betrothal was legally binding and the man would have certain obligations to ensure the marriage went ahead as planned at the appropriate time.

If his passions are strong translates a difficult word, Greek *hyperakmos*, that can also mean 'past one's prime' when used in reference to a woman. The translation here is preferable, however, because it is consistent with Paul's reasoning in vv.2-3 and v.9, and it would be strange for Paul to give permission to marry only when women are 'past their prime'.

And so it has to be probably refers to a sense of both moral and physical necessity to get married. Paul's comment is not intended as a disapproval of marriage, as already noted in v.28, and noted again in v.38. Paul is quite explicit about the benefits of marriage elsewhere. Refer to Ephesians 5:22-33 and 1 Timothy 4:1-4.

³⁷ But if someone stands firm in his resolve, being under no necessity but having his own desire under control, and has determined in his own mind to keep her as his fiancée, he will do well. ³⁸ So then, he who marries his fiancée does well; and he who refrains from marriage will do better.

1 Corinthians 7:37-38

Keep her as his fiancée. Paul now turns to the person who has the gift of celibacy and is able to refrain from marrying.

Does well and will do better illustrate the general principle that among choices that are morally good and not sinful, God can still give different opportunities for service, which will have different consequences. Another NT writer gives advice and a warning: <<***Let marriage be held in honour by all, and let the marriage***>>
New Revised Standard Version, Anglicised 1Corinthians7-16

bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers>> (Hebrews 13:4).

³⁹ A wife is bound as long as her husband lives. But if the husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, only in the Lord.

1 Corinthians 7:39

If the husband dies. The widow, like any other person of marriageable age (v.25), is free to marry. Presumably all that Paul has just said of the betrothed applies to the widow as well, and his admonition that she marry only in the Lord; that is, she should marry only a fellow Christian, would likewise apply to the betrothed.

Paul provided further teaching on this subject to the church in Rome: <<Thus a married woman is bound by the law to her husband as long as he lives; but if her husband dies, she is discharged from the law concerning the husband. Accordingly, she will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive. But if her husband dies, she is free from that law, and if she marries another man, she is not an adulteress>> (Romans 7:2-3).

To marry anyone she wishes injects a wonderful note of practical wisdom – that people should marry someone they wish to marry, using the Greek word *thelō*, that also can mean desire or want.

Only in the Lord is advice that such a woman should only marry another believer. If she were to marry a pagan or even an atheist then she could be drawn away from her faith. Paul would write to the church again on this issue: <<**Do not be mismatched with unbelievers. For what partnership is there between righteousness and lawlessness? Or what fellowship is there between light and darkness?**>> (2 Corinthians 6:14).

⁴⁰ But in my judgement she is more blessed if she remains as she is. And I think that I too have the Spirit of God.

1 Corinthians 7:40

In my judgement. Paul demonstrates the difference between teaching which comes from Scripture and personal interpretation of specific issues such as discussed here. However, his apostolic calling and pastoral experience indicate that his judgement should be considered sound.

I too have the Spirit of God. Paul had clearly been anointed by the Holy Spirit, probably from his encounter with Jesus close to Damascus or shortly afterwards.

These concluding verses have not been about Paul imposing his viewpoint on the church in Corinth or any other church throughout the ages. His advice is not binding but he is saying that he should be taken seriously. Christian teachers in each generation need to learn how to give wise and spirit-led advice while recognising that in some matters there may be room for disagreement.