

Marriage is not compulsory

Being single is a valid option

A sermon preached at Poplar Baptist Church in the morning service by Henry Dixon on 28th November 2004

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. If anyone thinks he is acting improperly toward the virgin he is engaged to, and if she is getting along in years and he feels he ought to marry, he should do as he wants. He is not sinning. They should 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 not to marry the virgin — this man also does the right thing. So then, he who marries the virgin does right, but he who does not marry her does even better. 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. (1 Corinthians 7.25 – 40)

Introduction

In this passage the apostle Paul tells us that marriage is not compulsory. If you are single or widowed you may remarry if you wish, and you would not be sinning to do so, but you may also, if you wish remain single. In fact, there are a number of advantages to being single. And above all, he says, whether we are married or single, we need to remember that this life is not all there is. Eternity is soon to come, when there will be no marriage, and we should live with one eye constantly on eternity.

We can divide the passage according to the paragraphs in the NIV translation:

Not to marry may be a good thing for you, verses 25 – 28

All of us need to remember that this world is passing away,
verses 29 – 31

The advantages of being single, and the disadvantages of being married,
verses 32 – 35

Advice for single people who already have boyfriends or girlfriends, verses 36
- 38

Advice for widows, verses 39 - 40

1. Not to marry may be a good thing for you

In verses 25 - 28 the apostle speaks to those "virgins", by which I think we can take it, those who are not married, or, as we would say today, those who are "single". He says

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.

He says he does not have a command from the Lord, so what he says is not something which is something which has to be obeyed but rather advice. He says he gives a "judgement as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy."

He then goes on to say that his opinion is that because of "the present crisis", it is good for those who are unmarried to remain unmarried. The question then arises, what does he mean when he speaks about "the present crisis"? Is he saying that there is some unusual crisis or persecution that the church is about to go through in the time he is writing the letter, and so for that reason his advice is not to marry? Or is he speaking about the "crisis" of living in a fallen world, which one day will be destroyed and replaced by a new world? I suggest the second alternative is the correct interpretation. All the reasons that the apostle goes on to give in verses 32 – 35 are valid in every age, and not just in the first century. So, he is saying, because of the crisis of this world, which is in its "death throes" and will soon pass away, you may be wise to consider not getting married.

So, the apostle says "Are you married? Do not seek a divorce. Are you unmarried? Do not look for a wife." But he then goes on to say "But if you do marry, you have not sinned, and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned." Marriage is not a sin. Nor is it unspiritual. If you do want to get married, you are not doing anything wrong. By putting forward singleness as a valid alternative to marriage, the apostle is not thereby saying marriage is bad. But the apostle does say that "those who marry will face many troubles in this life, and I want to spare you this."

We know from the Bible that marriage is a blessing. But, especially because we live in a fallen world, marriage also carries troubles with it. Paul says he wants to spare the unmarried person these troubles. So if you are not the sort of person who needs to be married, if you can get by in life OK on your own, and if you do not have very strong sexual urges, then stay as you are. But if you are someone who needs to marry, then you will not be sinning by getting married.

2. All of us need to remember that this world is passing away

The apostle goes on to say in verses 29 to 31,

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.

The time is short. We are living in the last days. We have been doing so since Pentecost. Jesus could come back at any time. Then this world as we know it will pass away. And, as Jesus said, at the resurrection there will be no marriage. And even if he does not come back during our lifetime, our lives are very short. In just a few blinks we shall be gone.

So, those who have wives should live as if they had none. Paul does not mean that those men who are married should desert their wives or neglect their responsibilities to their children. That would entirely contradict what he has been saying in this chapter. If you are a married man you should love your wife as Christ loved the church, and care for you wife, and look after your children. But you should not live as if your marriage were the whole point of your life. It is not. Christ is the point of your life. One day you or your wife will die. If your whole happiness depends upon the fact that you are married, then when your wife dies you will go to pieces. If you life is built upon Christ, your life will be on a firm foundation and will survive the trauma of bereavement. Equally, this understanding will help you to cope if your marriage is an unhappy one, or if you have to separate, or if your spouse divorces you against your will. If you have Christ, you have a solid anchor for your life which will help you to cope with such tragedies.

The apostle then applies this truth to all of life. He says those who mourn should act as if they did not. What does he mean? Are we to go into denial about the thing about which we are mourning? No. But we fix our eyes on Christ and on eternity, and so we do not allow our sorrows or problems to overwhelm us. One of the devil's ploys is to blow up our problems and sorrows out of all proportion, so that our whole consciousness is full of them. We lose "the big picture", the eternal perspective, and instead focus on our present sorrows. But, Paul says, let those who mourn live as if they did not. Remember the glorious inheritance towards which Christ has called you, and you will not be dominated by your sorrows.

Then the apostle says, "those who are happy, as if they were not." Again, is he saying that we have got to deny our real feelings, and have some sort of calm, impassive, serene existence which is not quite human? No. What he is saying is do not make things in this world your source of joy and happiness. Are you

blessed with a nice home, a good job, a wonderful wife and beautiful children? Give thanks to God, but let your real source of joy and delight be Christ, and what he has done for you. Then, if those things are taken from you, you will still be rejoicing.

Then the apostle says, "those who buy something, as if not theirs to keep." It is not sinful to buy things. Some things can be useful. But we need to remember that everything we buy is not really ours. It is on loan to us from God. And at any moment he can require it back from us. So we should not love our possessions and get too attached to them. They will soon be taken away. They will wear out, break, or be stolen. In any case, we cannot take them with us when we die. So we should just regard our possessions as temporarily on loan to us.

Then the apostle says, "those who use the things of this world as if not engrossed with them." We live in a material world. In the age we live in many of us use things like cars, computers and mobile phones every day, as well as the more mundane things like food and clothing. We use these things, but we should not be engrossed by them. We should not set our hearts on them. We should not all the time be thinking about this or that thing that we would like to buy. Our hearts and minds should be fixed on eternity.

The apostle then gives the reason for this. This world, in its present form, is passing away. Note: it is the present form of this world that is passing away. We sometimes talk in rather loose terms about "going to heaven when we die". But this can be misleading. The hope of the Scriptures is of a new world, new heaven and new earth, a recreation. There will be many similarities between the old world and the new, except that there will be no more death or destruction or sorrow, nor any sin or wrongdoing whatsoever. But before this new world begins, the old world will pass away.

3. The advantages of being single, and the disadvantages of being married

Paul goes on in verses 32 to 35 to describe the advantages of being single, and the disadvantages of being married.

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.

If you are single life is relatively uncomplicated. Your responsibilities are far more limited than if you are married, so you can focus your attention single-mindedly on your service of Christ. If you are a married person, you have many more responsibilities, both to your spouse and also to any children there may be. Marriage is a blessing, but it carries with it added pressures and concerns which you do not have as a single person.

Why does the apostle say this? "Not to restrict you", he says. Not to forbid marriage. But to show how being single can give an opportunity for single-minded devotion to Christ.

There is an important lesson here for those who are single: See being single as a positive opportunity, for as long as you are single. Being single provides a tremendous opportunity for you to be involved in outreach, visiting and encouraging other believers, or to go off on outreach trips in different parts of the country or around the world, or to serve as a missionary. If you are single, do not pine away, bemoaning the fact that you are single, and wishing you were married. See it as a positive opportunity. I have known some single people totally eaten up with bitterness and misery about their single state. This passage is the cure for that condition! See how fortunate you are to be single, and make the most of the opportunities that this gives you. And do not use up all your energy on your career. As a single person your needs can be catered for with a relatively low income, much lower than the income required for a married person with a large family. Do whatever work is necessary to provide for your needs, and devote your energy to serving the Lord.

4. Advice for those with girlfriends of boyfriends whom they have not married

In verses 36 – 38 the apostle gives advice to those who are friendly with someone whom they could marry. He says

If anyone thinks he is acting improperly toward the virgin he is engaged to, and if she is getting along in years and he feels he ought to marry, he should do as he wants. He is not sinning. They should 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 not to marry the virgin-- this man also does the right thing. So then, he who marries the virgin does right, but he who does not marry her does even better.

The phrase "engaged to" is inserted here by the NIV translation. The literal translation is "if anyone things he is acting dishonourably towards his virgin." In the light of what the apostle says later in the passage, I believe "girlfriend" would be a better translation. The apostle says that if a man thinks he is acting dishonourably towards his virgin, his girlfriend, he should marry her. What does this mean? I suggest it means that he has made an implicit or explicit promise to marry her, and he has not yet fulfilled it. If that is the case, and she is getting older, and he feels he ought to marry her, then he should go ahead and do so. He would not be sinning. He should get married.

But, the apostle goes on, if there's a man who has reconciled himself not to getting married, and if he is under no compulsion, in other words he has not made any promise to marry his girlfriend, and if he is under control of his own will, in other words sexual temptation is not a problem to him, if he decides not to marry his girlfriend, then he also does the right thing.

So, says the apostle, the person who marries his "virgin" does the right thing. But the one who does not marry her "does even better", because he is sparing himself much trouble, the sorts of trouble that he spoke of a few verses earlier.

5. Advice for widows

The apostle finishes this chapter with advice for widows, in verses 29 to 30:

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.

Divorce is a non-option for the Christian. "A woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives." Unless your husband has himself committed adultery, you are not free to divorce you husband just because you do not like him any more, or even because he is unreasonable. You are "bound" to him, as a slave is bound to his master.

But if her husband dies, she is free to remarry anyone as long as he belongs to the Lord, or literally is “in” the Lord. But, says the apostle, in his judgement she is happier if she stays as she is.

We need to balance what the apostle says here with what he says in 1 Timothy 5.14, where he counsels younger women to marry and to have children, and to manage their homes. So what the apostle says here in 1 Corinthians I think we can take to apply particularly to older widows. If you are an older widow, you are free to marry again, as long as your proposed husband is a believer. But you might be wise to stay as you are.

Conclusion

In conclusion, what is the overall message that comes out from this passage, and indeed from the whole of 1 Corinthians 7? Surely it is that whether or not you are married does not really matter very much. What matters is that you are a believer, and that you are living your life in obedience to God’s Word. If you are married, you should not seek to get a divorce, but you should do all you can to live as a good husband or wife. If you are single, you should not necessarily seek to be married, but take the opportunity of being single to serve Christ. However, if you are a single person and the opportunity comes up for marriage, and you have the need for companionship and sexual fulfilment, take that opportunity. That is not a sinful course of action.

But whatever position you are in, the most important thing is that you belong to Christ, and that you are living for the world that is to come. So I would say to you, are you a Christian? Are you right with God? You could have the most happy marriage that this world can give, but if you are not right with God it will do you no good in eternity. Make sure you belong to Christ. If you have any doubts at all about your salvation, come to God today and ask him to give you eternal life through Jesus Christ.

And if you are a believer, hold on to what the apostle said about living as though what you have now is not yours to keep. Fix your eyes on eternity. Then whether you are married or single, and if you are married, whether that marriage is happy or unhappy, you will be able to rejoice in God’s love and serve him properly.

Unless otherwise stated, Scripture quotations are taken from the Holy Bible,

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