

Marriage, Divorce, and Singleness

1 Corinthians 7:1-16

Introduction

1 Corinthians: Every book of the Bible is relevant, inspired, and applicable but 1 Corinthians feels like it could have been written to the 21st-century church (e.g., division, marriage problems, sexual immorality, lawsuits, tribalism, etc.).

Marriage and Singleness: We're getting into a new part of 1 Corinthians, and this section deals with questions the church had for Paul, in particular about sex, marriage, and singleness (I'll try to keep this PG-10 but that's also why we have RH kids where they will not be talking about sex). **I ran across an interview of children askign them what they thought about marriage.** Here are a few highlights.

- (1) "How do you know who to marry?" (Kristen, 10) "No person really decides before they grow up who they're going to marry. God decides it all way before, and you get to find out later who you're stuck with." (2) "How can you tell if two people are married?" (Derrick, 8) "You might have to guess, based on whether they seem to be yelling at the same kids." (3) "What's the key to a good marriage?" (Ricky, 10) "Tell your wife that she looks pretty, even if she looks like a truck."

Again?: This is the second sermon I have preached at Redemption Heights with this same title (marriage, divorce, and singleness), but the other was from a totally different passage (Matthew 19:1-12). They are two different sermons. When the Bible repeats something, it's **not to be repetitive but emphatic**. Why does God talk so much about these topics? (e.g., money, marriage, etc. because these are the things that most often keep us from God).

Wrong Destination: One the greatest cinematic masterpieces of the 20th century, *Home Alone 2: Lost in New York*. The Chicago area Kevin McCallister (Macaulay Culkin), through a series of antiquated airline systems, human errors, and accidents, boards a plane thinking he is with his family heading to Florida but finds out when he lands that he is alone in New York. Many people look at relationships and think it will take them someplace (happiness, fulfillment, comfort) and they end up at another destination (turmoil, brokenness, disappointment). The destination God has for you is his purpose, plan, and glory.

¹ Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman." ² But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. ³ The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. 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. ⁵ Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. ⁶ Now as a concession, not a command, I say this. ⁷ I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own gift from God,

one of one kind and one of another. ⁸ To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single, as I am. ⁹ But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion. ¹⁰ To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband ¹¹ (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife. ¹² To the rest I say (I, not the Lord) that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. ¹³ If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. ¹⁴ For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. ¹⁵ But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace. ¹⁶ For how do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?¹

Gift: But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another.

- Your relationship status, whether married, single, widowed, or divorced, is a **gift** to be celebrated and stewarded for the glory of God.

1. Marriage: A Place to Belong (vv. 1-5)

¹ Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: “It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.” ² But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. ³ The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. 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. ⁵ Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.

(v. 1) **Question:** ¹ Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: *They* asked him about this stuff. He just spent 6 chapters telling them what they *needed* to hear (they don’t set the agenda). But he did get around to their question.

¹ ¹ Περὶ δὲ ὧν ἐγράψατε, καλὸν ἀνθρώπων γυναικὸς μὴ ἄπτεσθαι· ² διὰ δὲ τὰς πορνείας ἕκαστος τὴν ἑαυτοῦ γυναῖκα ἔχέτω καὶ ἑκάστη τὸν ἴδιον ἄνδρα ἔχέτω· ³ τῇ γυναικὶ ὁ ἀνὴρ τὴν ὀφειλὴν ἀποδιδότω, ὁμοίως δὲ καὶ ἡ γυνὴ τῷ ἀνδρὶ· ⁴ ἡ γυνὴ τοῦ ἰδίου σώματος οὐκ ἐξουσιάζει ἀλλὰ ὁ ἀνὴρ, ὁμοίως δὲ καὶ ὁ ἀνὴρ τοῦ ἰδίου σώματος οὐκ ἐξουσιάζει ἀλλὰ ἡ γυνὴ· ⁵ μὴ ἀποστερεῖτε ἀλλήλους, εἰ μήτι ἂν ἐκ συμφώνου πρὸς καιρὸν, ἵνα σχολάσητε τῇ προσευχῇ καὶ πάλιν ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτὸ ἦτε, ἵνα μὴ πειράζῃ ὑμᾶς ὁ Σατανᾶς διὰ τὴν ἀκρασίαν ὑμῶν· ⁶ τοῦτο δὲ λέγω κατὰ συγγνώμην οὐ κατ’ ἐπιταγὴν· ⁷ θέλω δὲ πάντας ἀθρώπους εἶναι ὡς καὶ ἑμαυτὸν· ἀλλὰ ἕκαστος ἴδιον ἔχει χάρισμα ἐκ θεοῦ, ὁ μὲν οὕτως, ὁ δὲ οὕτως· ⁸ Λέγω δὲ τοῖς ἀγάμοις καὶ ταῖς χήραις, καλὸν αὐτοῖς ἂν μείνωσιν ὡς καγὼ· ⁹ εἰ δὲ οὐκ ἐγκρατεύονται, γαμησάτωσαν, κρεῖττον γάρ ἐστιν γαμῆσαι ἢ πυροῦσθαι· ¹⁰ τοῖς δὲ γεγαμηκόσιν παραγγέλλω, οὐκ ἐγὼ ἀλλὰ ὁ κύριος, γυναῖκα ἀπὸ ἀνδρὸς μὴ χωρισθῆναι, ¹¹ — ἂν δὲ καὶ χωρισθῇ, μενέτω ἄγαμος ἢ τῷ ἀνδρὶ καταλλαγῆτω, — καὶ ἄνδρα γυναῖκα μὴ ἀφιέναι· ¹² τοῖς δὲ λοιποῖς λέγω ἐγὼ οὐχ ὁ κύριος· εἰ τις ἀδελφὸς γυναῖκα ἔχει ἄπιστον καὶ αὕτη συνουδοκεῖ οἰκεῖν μετ’ αὐτοῦ, μὴ ἀφιέτω αὐτήν· ¹³ καὶ γυνὴ εἰ τις ἔχει ἄνδρα ἄπιστον καὶ οὗτος συνουδοκεῖ οἰκεῖν μετ’ αὐτῆς, μὴ ἀφιέτω τὸν ἄνδρα· ¹⁴ ἡγίασται γὰρ ὁ ἀνὴρ ὁ ἄπιστος ἐν τῇ γυναικὶ καὶ ἡγίασται ἡ γυνὴ ἢ ἄπιστος ἐν τῷ ἀδελφῷ· ἐπεὶ ἄρα τὰ τέκνα ὑμῶν ἀκάθαρτα ἐσιν, νῦν δὲ ἅγια ἐσιν· ¹⁵ εἰ δὲ ὁ ἄπιστος χωρίζεται, χωρίζεσθω· οὐ δεδούλωται ὁ ἀδελφὸς ἢ ἡ ἀδελφὴ ἐν τοῖς τοιοῦτοις· ἐν δὲ εἰρήνῃ κέκληκεν ὑμᾶς ὁ θεός· ¹⁶ τί γὰρ οἶδας, γυναῖκα, εἰ τὸν ἄνδρα σώσεις; ἢ τί οἶδας, ἄνερ, εἰ τὴν γυναῖκα σώσεις;

- What **they** wrote (direct quote or pithy statement): “(namely) It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with (ἅπτω; to touch) a woman.”
 - Specific question (with some general transferable applications). It’s not a comprehensive treatise on marriage but it does have a lot of general applicability.
 - For much of history (including Christian history), various thinkers have seen sex as a defiling or bad, a necessary evil (e.g., Augustine). I mean, Jesus wasn’t married, Paul wasn’t married, marriage isn’t in heaven, etc. (RCC perpetual virginity of Mary because of view of sex not Bible; Jesus had brothers)
 - If sexual immorality was bad, then celibacy must be good (best?) (that’s what we call an overreaction; pendulum swing). Singleness and celibacy is (can be?) good, but don’t take it too far.
- Asceticism (self-denial and avoidance), dualism (physical bad, spiritual good), etc.
 - ²⁰ If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations— ²¹ “Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch” ²² (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings? ²³ These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh (Col 2:20-23).
 - ¹ Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, ² through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, ³ who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. ⁴ For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, ⁵ for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer (1 Tim 4:1-5).

(v. 2) **Marriage is Normal:** ² But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband.

- God created marriage for lots of things (e.g., “be fruitful and multiply”) and he made us to desire companionship and sex. Sex is not bad (amen) but is God-created, normal and natural. But **without marriage** it is misplaced, twisted, perverted. God has given us a means to enjoy sexual intimacy (marriage). Paul is not downgrading marriage (just read what he says in Ephesians 5).
- **Indiscriminate love is not true love.** True love must be rightly directed. It must be in God’s order. **Love is love** (blue is blue; truism, tautology). But there is such a thing as misplaced and misdirected love. There is a difference between God’s love and false love. In this case, sex was made for the context of God-ordained covenantal marriage.
- God created marriage in the beginning (Gen 2), Jesus affirms that plan in the gospels (cf. Matt 19). God made marriage for man and woman to live as one flesh, united by God, in a lifelong covenant. And any sexual activity out of that is immorality (πορνεία).

Grace: There is grace for any sexual failure. This is not about shaming you for your past but guiding you into the future God has for you. But ignoring God’s plan, failing to recognize past

failure actually robs you of the honest opportunity to apply God's grace to the parts of your heart that need it the most and set you up for continued hurt and harm in the future.

- Paul is trying to offer hope and protect these couples because temptation is real and sin hurts us!

(v. 3) **Sex is Good:** ³ The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. That's a pretty direct translation of a euphemistic original (τῇ γυναικὶ ὁ ἀνὴρ τὴν ὀφειλὴν ἀποδίδωτω, ὁμοίως δὲ καὶ ἡ γυνὴ τῷ ἀνδρὶ.; lit. "to the wife the husband should fulfill the obligation, and likewise also the wife to the husband")

- One of the purposes of marriage is sex, want to have sex? Get married.

(v. 4) **Mutuality:** The heart of the gospel shines through with this beautiful display of mutuality. ⁴ For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does (kind of par for the course for the ancient world and much of human history). Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does (revolutionary)!

- The gospel is not a call to get what is owed but to give away what we have. **The gospel is not about entitled self-taking but generous self-giving.** (Christiano Ronaldo, Saudi Arabia, bending law against unmarried couples cohabitating; "if a man would make a country change their laws rather than marry you, he doesn't love you").
- In a marriage, the husband and wife **belong to each other.** "I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine" (Song 6:3). This is one of the reasons marriage is so important, it is a permanent promise to love, commit, and belong. It is a place to know and be known
 - I am not worried about what I can get but what I can give. I am not worried about my happiness but my wife's. If I would only care about my wife (and she me) there would be no arguments or friction in our marriage. When I try to get even, or get what's mine, or keep a record of wrong, then the problems start.
- (v. 5) talks about agreement in marriage, gr. σύμφωνος ("together sound"; "common voice"; symphony). There a sense that a husband and wife are in harmony, one entity united in purpose and belonging freely to one another.
 - "Sex is a way to say, 'I belong completely and exclusively to you'" (Keller), which is why it's so painful and disruptive when the activity of sex is separated from the permanency of marriage..

(v. 5) **God's Glory:** ⁵ Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. So, maybe there is a season to abstain in a marriage, but it certainly isn't prolonged or permanent, and it is only by mutual decision for the purpose of pursuing God.

Divided Church: This is a divided church, and you can see the factions: (1) too sexually promiscuous (chs. 5-6); (2) too sexually restrictive (ch. 7).

- The "free to do anything" and the "must abstain from everything" crowd are equally setting themselves outside their God-given limitations (Hays).

- When we glorify or demonize sex we create rebels or Pharisees. God wants us to enjoy his gifts but never to love them more than we love him.
- There is a beautiful tension in Scripture that says “it is not good for man to be alone” (Gen 2) and “it is good to remain single” (1 Cor 7). These are not contradictions but different callings.
 - Many heresies exist because they flatten these tension. Immature theology ignores tension and healthy theology lives in these tension and seeks to wisely apply these principles.

2. Singleness: A Good Gift (vv. 6-9)

⁶ Now as a concession, not a command, I say this. ⁷ I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another. ⁸ To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single, as I am. ⁹ But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion.

(v. 6) **Concession:** ⁶ Now as a concession, not a command, I say this. Paul is not conceding marriage, he is upholding marriage in the face of those who would destroy it for false holiness. He is calling some to consider singleness, and others to marriage. **It’s not a rule, but a calling that different people have.** Marriage is good and right for some people. Singleness is good and right for some people. And part of discipleship is not just picking whichever you prefer but following God to what he’s calling you to.

(v. 7a) **Singleness is Good:** ⁷ I wish that all were as I myself am. A lot of churches pretend like singleness is for JV Christians.

- #WhyImSingle (Fallon): (1) I’m single because I get mad at people in real life for things they did in my dreams. (2) My ex and I did laundry together, and we broke up because he couldn’t admit that my way of folding towels and sheets was the correct way.

They *goal* is to be married (they have single adult classes that function as little more than Christian speed dating). Many Christians idolize marriage (willing to forsake good judgment, God’s call, and wisdom just to “be married”).

- (v. 8) ⁸ To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single, as I am.² **It is good to remain single** (if God has given you the calling and self-control to do so). It is good to be unmarried (saying something is good doesn’t mean something else is bad). Saying singleness is good doesn’t mean marriage is bad (and vice/versa).
- There are lots of benefits of being single. More on singleness in over the next two weeks (why singleness is a particularly important calling to advance the KoG).

“God promises those of you who remain single in Christ blessings that are better than the blessings of marriage and children, and he calls you to display, by the Christ-exalting devotion of your singleness, the truths about Christ and his kingdom that shine more clearly through singleness than through marriage and childrearing... And he gives you an extraordinary calling for your life. To be single in Christ is not a falling short of God’s best, but a path of Christ-exalting, covenant-keeping obedience that many are called to walk” (Piper).

² Implies Paul might be a widow.

- Singleness and celibacy is *an option* (and *possibly* a good option).
- “For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world (marriage) and forfeit his soul?” (Mk 8:36).

(v. 7b) **Different Strokes:** But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another. Again, this is a “preview of coming attractions” for next week. **Live the life God has called you to.**

- Notice that singleness (and marriage) are called “gifts” (χάρισμα). The word gift is related to the word grace (free, gracious). Each Christian is given “spiritual gifts.” The church has many different people with different gifts.
 - We need God’s grace to be married well for his glory or to be single well for his glory. **Don’t get married without God’s grace. Don’t try to live single without God’s grace.**
- **Gift.** God gave you exactly what you need. “You can’t beat God at giving, no matter how hard you try.” It’s tax time, I look at my charitable giving. *I didn’t miss a thing.*
- What does it look like to joyfully embrace your calling rather than being jealous of someone else’s?

3. Divorce: A Last Resort (vv. 10-16)

¹⁰ To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband ¹¹ (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife. ¹² To the rest I say (I, not the Lord) that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. ¹³ If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. ¹⁴ For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. ¹⁵ But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace. ¹⁶ For how do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?

Divorce: (Running out of time) I can’t give a comprehensive theology of divorce, let me recommend my sermon on [Matthew 19:1-12](#) (May 2021) and on [Malachi](#) (July 2022).

- Every divorce involves a loss, a brokenness, a promise failed and a hope unrealized. Even when divorce is necessary (abuse) or wise (abandonment), it is still a result of someone’s sin. Sometimes divorce is necessary but it is never “good” in the truest sense. It is sometimes wise but never desirable (again, this is not to shame your past but guide your future).
- If we’re honest, we’ve made marriage only about personal fulfillment, happiness, and comfort, so divorce isn’t just a sad necessity to escape abuse or because of infidelity but the easy go to when someone is no longer happy. Rather than fight to find God’s joy in marriage, we quit to pursue our own ease.
- **If marriage is only about personal happiness, then divorce is okay if I’m unhappy.**

- One reason marriage is hardly esteemed in our culture is because marriage is from God and for God but we've made it from me and for me.
- We wonder why younger people don't want to get married? When they see 50% of marriage end in divorce, they are skeptical (would you fly a plane if 50% of them crashed). The impact is incalculable on families.

Simple Point: Christians who are married to Christians should do everything possible to stay married (understanding divorce is sometimes a tragic result of sin), we should not easily contemplate or pursue it (certainly not like the world). This is reinforcing what Jesus says (not I, but the Lord; cf. Gen 2, Matt 19). But even **Christians who are married to non-Christians** should do everything possible to stay married. We should do everything we can, as Christians to reconcile and preserve marriage.

- Paul is dealing with a new situation (hence, I, not the Lord). Non-Christians are married and one converts. What should they do now? Should they divorce? They shouldn't initiate it (different if the unbelieving spouse initiates).

Why? Your staying in this marriage has sanctifying effects on your children and may lead your spouse to salvation! Holiness is not always something to be lost by exposure to the unclean, it is also something to be shared. There is a "contagious holiness."

- Don't marry an unbeliever, but if you're already married, stay (e.g., Christian grandma who leads grandkids into the gospel; godly husband who leads his family into the gospel; husband who comes to faith after years of patient godliness from wife) (cf. 1 Pet 3).

God's Good Purpose: Be careful how you define "good." What you see as bad might be God working something good.

- Some take a **pessimistic** view of this passage (you don't know you'll save him), others an optimistic (who knows, you might save him). On 1 Cor 13:7: "When love has no evidence, it believes the best. When the evidence is adverse, it hopes for the best. And when hopes are repeatedly disappointed, it courageously waits" (Robertson).
 - Don't underestimate the power of God to transform even the unlikeliest person.
- We need more marriages that push through rather than give up. We need grace-fueled resilience, rather than despair-filled abandonment.
 - How do you tough it out? (1) Stop viewing your spouse as your savior and find your hope in Christ. (2) Rely on God's grace and not your own. (3) Do it for the glory of God and the good of others. It is better to spend all of your life and energy for the gospel than hoard it all for yourself

Conclusion:

We want to delight in the goodness of marriage and gift of singleness. We want to recognize the unique opportunities and challenges of both.

- There is a way to be **selfishly single** (e.g., afraid to commit; living for yourself; unwilling to give of yourself for someone else) and a way to be **selfishly married** (e.g., personal gain, fulfilling your desires, afraid to be alone, idolizing marriage). There is also a temptation to get **selfishly divorced**.

- Marriage is not, ultimately, for personal fulfillment. Marriage is a gift to be given. “It is better to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35). If you live for yourself (contra Phil 2:1-11) you live against the principles, teachings, and example of Jesus. To live against the way of Christ is to fight against your own joy. Jesus’ way is selfless. Some people are selfishly married. Others are selfishly single. It is not the choice to be single or to be married that is at stake, it is the heart behind the choice. Singleness is a gift to be given in service of God (1 Cor 7), to go places and serve in such ways that a married person cannot. In the same way, marriage is a gift to be given freely for the glory and mission of God. You are not married to accumulate more wealth or hoard more comfort or merely uncover more pleasure, but to leverage your family for the eternal and unsurpassable Kingdom of God (Allberry *adapted*).

We want to **value** marriage and singleness without idolizing either. Both have advantages and disadvantages. **Marriage and singleness are not a cause for envy but gifts to be celebrated**, both in your life and in the lives of others.

- Whatever stage you’re in, it’s for Christ. Don’t think, like so many in the world, “If I can get out of this marriage, then I’ll be happy” or, “if I can get married, then I’ll be happy,” but learn to be content in Christ whatever your circumstance. “The secret is Christ in you, not you in a different set of circumstances.” Changing your situation or season will not make you a happier, more fulfilled Christian. Marriage and singleness are gifts and callings to be stewarded for God.

Leveraging Your Life for the Gospel: What would it look like to maximize your marriage or your singleness for the gospel? Our church is healthier with gospel-shaped marriages and gospel-focused singles.

- Are you pursuing marriage for yourself or to leverage it for God?
- Are you looking for a gospel marriage or just someone to make you happy?
- If you feel called to marriage, are you becoming the person God wants you to be for your future spouse?
- Are you staying single for yourself or to invest your time and energy in the Kingdom of God?
- Are you using this season of singleness to check items off your bucket list or invest in the spread of the gospel?
- Do you treasure your singleness or your marriage as a gift from God or do you resent what someone else has?