

On Celibacy, Marriage, and Divorce

In Light of the Impending Great Tribulation

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The Corinthian's Concerns

The Apostle Paul's instructions to the Corinthians on celibacy, marriage, and divorce have been greatly misunderstood. The misunderstandings stem from the failure to grasp Paul's reliance on Jesus' former teaching, and ignorance of the question he was answering. That Paul was responding to a specific question the Corinthians had sent to him is clear from his opening words in chapter seven of 1 Corinthians, "*Now about that which you wrote to me, ...*". The question is not stated, only Paul's response. The interpreter must reconstruct the question based on inferences from Paul's answer.

After thoroughly analyzing the text, it became apparent to me that Paul was answering a question about how the Corinthians ought to deal with marital situations in light of Jesus' warnings concerning the impending Great Tribulation. Jesus instructed His followers to watch for the signs of His coming described in the Olivet Discourse.¹ He also warned that in the last days, family members would betray one another, causing their deaths. "*Now brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; and children will rise up against parents and cause them to be put to death. And you will be hated by all for My name's sake. But he who endures to the end shall be saved.*"² Since the Corinthian believers had been converted from paganism, some of them were still married to pagans. This would be a very precarious situation for them if the end time scenario began fairly quickly. What should they do? Should they divorce the unbeliever?

Some were also concerned about starting a new family in light of the coming tribulation. In Greek culture, a young virgin was usually promised to a man by means of a contract made with her father. Once she came of age, she was contractually obliged to marry him. A man who had such a contract for a virgin was also obligated to her father to marry her. Yet, Jesus had given another stern warning for those contemplating starting a new family during the days of great tribulation. "*But woe to those who are*

¹ Mark 13:24-37

² Mark 13:12-13. See also: Matt. 10:21; Matt. 24:10

pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days! And pray that your flight may not be in winter. For in those days there will be tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the creation which God created until this time, nor ever shall be. And unless the Lord had shortened those days, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect's sake, whom He chose, He shortened the days."³

Paul referred specifically to "the time that has been shortened" in his answer, virtually quoting the above passage. He stated plainly that certain instructions were intended specifically for that time period. Yet, he stopped short of saying that it was imminent.

Below I have reconstructed the Corinthian's letter to Paul, followed by my own translation of his answer (1 Corinthians 7) from the Greek text, with commentary footnotes. Paul provided wise counsel concerning marital issues for believers approaching the last days. His advice is much more relevant now than in the first century.

Dear Beloved Brother, Paul,

You taught us about Jesus' warnings that family members will betray one another in the approaching last days. As you know, many of the brothers and sisters here are married to spouses who worship idols and do not follow the teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ. Some brothers are of the opinion that we ought to divorce such spouses, a principle that is also consistent with Moses' teachings and Ezra's application of it.⁴

Also, some of our men are contractually betrothed to virgins who are becoming of marriageable age. You taught us Jesus' warning about starting a new family during the end times, that 'woes' await wives who are pregnant and nursing. Some of these brothers believe they must remain single, thereby preserving the virginity of their betrothed virgins, and sparing them such anxiety. It seems to us that if the end is near, it is best to follow your own example, to be unmarried until Jesus comes. Please advise.

Yours in Christ,

The Elders of the Church of Corinth

³ Mark 13:17-20

⁴ Deut. 7:3-4; Ezra 9-10

Paul's Response

Paul, called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ through the will of God, and Sosthenes our brother,

To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all who in every place call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.⁵

Human Marriage is Necessary – 1 Corinthians 7

1. Now about that which you wrote to me, it is indeed best for a man not to be touching a woman. 2. But because of fornication, each⁶ man must have himself a woman. And each⁶ woman must have herself a man.⁷ 3. The man must be giving to the woman [his] conjugal obligation, and similarly also the woman to the man.⁸ 4. The woman does not have sovereignty over her own body, but the man. Yet, similarly also, the man does not have sovereignty over his own body, but the woman. 5. Do not deprive each other unless by agreement for a specified time, so that you may seclude yourselves for fasting and prayer, and then you should resume this [conjugal obligation] so that Satan may not tempt you through your weakness.⁹

The Superiority of Celibacy

6. I am saying this by indulgence, not by command. 7 I wish all men to be as I myself [am].¹⁰ But each has his own gift from God, one like this, another like that.¹¹ 8 Yet I am saying to the unmarried and to the widows, it is indeed best for them if they should remain like me. 9 But if they are unable to restrain¹² they must marry. It is better to marry than to be burning.¹³

⁵ 1 Cor. 1:1-3

⁶ "hekastos," superlative of 'hekas': each and every. Paul seems to leave no exceptions except for those who have the gift of celibacy, which he deems superior.

⁷ Paul seems to both justify his own celibate lifestyle and commend marriage. That celibacy is a superior way of life was stated also by Jesus in His comments about eunuchs, (Matt. 19:10-12). But, He too acknowledged that this was only for a few who had such a gift, those who were "able to receive it." Paul commands all who do not have the gift of celibacy to marry in order to avoid fornication.

⁸ On the same grounds as the previous statement (to avoid fornication), once married, the conjugal obligation must be met by both spouses as necessitated by the sexual needs and desires of the other.

⁹ Lack of self control.

¹⁰ Celibate

¹¹ Jesus also indicated that celibacy is possible only for a few who have such a gift, Matt. 19:10-12

¹² Their sexual needs

¹³ With passion

Jesus' General Rule for Christian Marriage

10. I, (not I, but the Lord¹⁴), command those who have entered marriage: The woman is not to separate from the man. 11. Yet, if she has [already] separated, she must remain unmarried or be reconciled to the man.¹⁵ And the man must not divorce the woman.¹⁶

Practical Exceptions to Jesus' General Rule

12. I, (not the Lord¹⁷), say to the rest¹⁸: If any brother has an unfaithful¹⁹ woman and she is content to cohabit with him, he must not divorce her. 13. And if any woman has an unfaithful¹³ man and he is content to cohabit with her, she must not divorce the man. 14. For the unfaithful man has been sanctified in the woman. And the unfaithful woman has been sanctified in the brother, (otherwise your children are unclean; but now they are holy).²⁰ 15. But if the unfaithful one departs, let them depart. The brother or sister has not been bound²¹ in such cases – God has called us unto tranquility.²²

¹⁴ Paul was referencing Jesus' own commandment regarding divorce: that it was forbidden for God's people except on grounds of marital unfaithfulness (Matt. 5:31-32 & 19:1-9).

¹⁵ This presupposes that she has not also remarried. The Law of Moses made such a return to a former husband an "abomination to the LORD" (Deut. 24:1-4).

¹⁶ This was Paul's interpretation of Jesus' previous teaching recorded in the Gospels. That Paul did not mention the 'exception clause' for fornication (Matt. 5:32 & Matt. 19:9) is not problematic since his readers were already well familiar with it. Jesus' remarks concerned married couples who both were in a covenant relationship with God. Paul assumes this as well by commanding both the husband and the wife, and reminding them of what Jesus commanded.

¹⁷ Paul was not saying that the following instructions were merely his opinion (making them optional), but that Jesus did not address the following issues specifically. These commands were new revelation given through Paul to Gentiles, made necessary by the spread of the Gospel beyond Israel, God's covenant people.

¹⁸ Paul distinguished "the rest" in verses 12-16 (faithful believers married to unfaithful spouses) from Jesus' commands to "those who have entered marriage" (vss. 10-11). This distinction implies that Jesus' general rule (no divorce) is limited to couples who both are faithful disciples of Jesus Christ. That would include couples who both became believers after marriage, or two people who entered marriage as disciples of Jesus Christ. This is consistent with Jesus' words in the Gospels spoken to Jewish people who had a covenantal relationship with God.

¹⁹ The Greek word can mean either "unbelieving" / "untrusting" (active sense), or "unfaithful" / "untrustworthy" (passive sense – see Prov. 17:6 LXX). Thayer's defines it as, "unfaithful, faithless, (not to be trusted, perfidious)." Here it may mean either an unbeliever (who overtly denies Christ) or one who is unfaithful or untrustworthy (one who denies Him in action and lifestyle). Either way, it is not the 'profession' of faith that is critical, but the life of obedience to Jesus Christ which distinguishes one from the other.

²⁰ Paul had in mind God's ultimate purpose for joining man and wife in "one flesh" as stated by Malachi: "But did He not make them one, having a remnant of the Spirit? And why one? He seeks godly offspring." (Mal. 2:15). Paul's point is that God is able to raise up godly offspring with one faithful parent who can instruct and pass on God's Word to children even within a mixed marriage. Timothy is a good example of this. He knew the Holy Scriptures "from a child" thanks to his Jewish mother and grandmother. Yet, his father was a Greek unbeliever (as is evidenced by Timothy's being uncircumcised – Acts 16:1-3).

²¹ The Greek word means to have been placed in a state of servitude or bondage.

²² God has called believers to a place of rest and peace, not to being bound forever to an unfaithful spouse who is not content to live in matrimony with the faithful believer. Some commentators infer that this state of peace and being unbound means the faithful believer is free to remarry. Others disagree. However, see verses 27-28.

16. Because, how could you know, woman, whether you will rescue the man? Or how could you know, man, whether you will rescue the woman?²³

Remaining True to One's Gift and Calling

17. Now accordingly as the Lord has equipped²⁴ each one, accordingly as God has called each one, this [path] he should walk. And this is what I am prescribing in all the churches.²⁵

Jew or Gentile?

18. Was anyone called having been circumcised? Don't become uncircumcised. Was anyone called in uncircumcision? Don't become circumcised. 19. (Circumcision is not important, and uncircumcision is not important, but observing the commandments of God [is what is important]).²⁶

Slave or Free?

20. Each one, in the calling with which he was called, remain in this. 21. You were called a slave? Do not be concerned. But if you are able to gain freedom, do it. 22. (For the slave who was called in the Lord is the Lord's free man. Likewise, the freeman who was called is Christ's slave. 23. You were purchased with [great] cost; do not become slaves of men.)

Single or Married?

24. Brothers, each one in whatever [state] he was called, in this remain with God. 25. Yet about²⁷ [female] virgins²⁸, I do not have a commandment from the Lord, but I am giving my opinion²⁹ as having received mercy from the Lord to be faithful. 26. I advise, therefore, **this ideal to be**

²³ Paul explains his reasoning for the requirement in verses 12-13, that a faithful spouse must remain with an unfaithful one as long as the unfaithful spouse is content to cohabit.

²⁴ "Distributed" – God has given each a gift or ability, some to celibacy and some to marriage (cf. v. 7 & Matt. 19:10-12).

²⁵ Paul brings to bear two considerations for those contemplating marriage. The first has to do with whether one is equipped by God for celibate life or married life. The second is the calling one has received from God. Paul advises that one ought not deviate from his God given abilities and calling. However, Paul does allow such deviation as described in the following verses. Most likely the deviation is acknowledged as people's abilities may change as they mature in the Christian Faith.

²⁶ See Rom. 2:12-29

²⁷ "Concerning." Here Paul is viewing "virgins" as a third party, not being addressed directly. His instructions deal with what the "brothers" were to do "about virgins," rather than instructing virgins directly. The commands are directed to the men regarding whether they ought to take a (virgin) wife or remain celibate.

²⁸ The Greek word "virgins" (parthenos) is feminine and refers to females exclusively.

²⁹ Paul's advice was based on his supposition that the Great Tribulation would begin soon, as indicated by the following verses. Yet, he made it very clear that he had not heard from the Lord specifically in this regard.

followed³⁰ through the impending³¹ distress³² – it is good for a man to be like this: 27. Have you been bound to a woman? Do not seek a divorce. Have you been divorced³³ from a woman? Do not seek a woman. 28. However, if you should marry, you have not sinned. (Also if the virgin should marry, she has not sinned). Yet, these will have tribulation³⁴ in the flesh, and I am [trying to] spare you.

29. But I say this, brothers, that **the time which has been shortened³⁵ still remains³⁶ [ahead]**, so that those having women should be as not having [women],³⁷ and the lamenting as not lamenting,³⁸ and the rejoicing as not rejoicing,³⁹ and those buying as not possessing,⁴⁰ and those using the [present] system as not abusing it, because the structure of the [present] system is passing away.⁴¹ 32. But I want you to be without anxiety. (The single man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how he will be pleasing to the Lord. 33. But the married man is anxious

³⁰ The Greek word means “to begin below,” that is, this ideal is to be followed in the future (during the impending distress).

³¹ Or “threatening”

³² The Greek word means to be “pressed,” and here refers to impending persecution, as Jesus warned in Matt. 24:9-12.

³³ Literally, “loosed from.” This term refers to divorce of an engagement (Matt. 1:19) or divorce of a consummated marriage (cf. Matt. 19:7 & Deut. 24:1). The term “loosed from” (λυω απο) in the context of marriage always refers to divorce in Scripture, never to death. The Greek word ‘loose’ frequently means ‘break,’ ‘destroy’ or ‘demolish,’ (see Matt. 5:19; John 2:19; John 5:18; Eph. 2:14). When Paul spoke of widows being released from the marriage bond, he said they were “free of” the marriage, not “loosed from” the marriage bond, (Rom. 7:3; 1 Cor. 7:39). Paul used the noun form of the same word in the previous sentence, saying that a married man should not “seek to be loosed.” This does not refer to seeking the death of his wife, but seeking a divorce. Therefore, when he referred to those already “loosed from a woman” in the next clause, he meant Christians who were already divorced. Paul advised that they remain single. But he also permitted their marriage and declared them innocent in remarriage.

³⁴ Jesus warned about the enormous trouble that awaits those trying to start a family during the time of tribulation. “But woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days! ... For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be.” (Matt. 24:19,21).

³⁵ Literally, “the time that has been shortened.” This is a reference to Jesus’ statement that the time of Great Tribulation has been shortened for the sake of the elect, (Mark 13:20). Paul’s instructions in verses 25-40 are specific for believers living through this time of great trouble.

³⁶ The coming of the Great Tribulation was impending, and “remaining” to be fulfilled. Paul supposed that it was within the lifetimes of his readers. And his advice was not to settle down in the present system of things (fashion of the world). His instructions are much more relevant for us who live in the last days.

³⁷ Within the context of the Great Tribulation, and the need to flee quickly to safety, Jesus warned His followers to “remember Lot’s wife” (cf. Luke 17:32 & Luke 21:36). Those with wives must not allow familial relationships to interfere with the commands to flee when the signal is given. Believers must be ready to forsake even family members in order to escape the impending judgment.

³⁸ With Jesus’ return impending, it is pointless to lament for the dead since the resurrection will accompany it, (1 Thess. 4:13-18).

³⁹ Newlyweds who were rejoicing may only have a very short time to do so if the impending Great Tribulation overtakes them.

⁴⁰ Those investing in lands or possessions would lose them all at the Great Jubilee, when the inheritance will be Christ’s and distributed and inherited according to His judgment.

⁴¹ Paul again refers to the impending second coming. (cf. Romans 8:18-25; Hebrews 12:25-29)

about the [present] system, how he will be pleasing to the woman. 34. The same distinction applies to the virgin and [married] woman. The virgin is anxious about the things of the Lord, that she may be holy in body and in spirit. Yet the married woman is anxious for the things of the [present] system, how she will be pleasing to the man). 35. I speak this for your own benefit, not that I should be placing a noose around you,⁴² but toward excellence and undistracted devotion to the Lord.

Couples Already Engaged

36. Now, if anyone is acting audacious⁴³ towards his [betrothed] virgin, and if she could pass the prime [of childbearing age] and it becomes pressing, he should do as he wishes. He does not sin. They should marry. 37. Yet, the man who has taken a settled stand in his heart, not having necessity, and having power over his desires, and has determined this in his own heart – to preserve his [betrothed] virgin⁴⁴ – does better. 38. So also, the one consummating the marriage of his [betrothed] virgin does well. And the one not consummating the marriage will do better.

Widows of Faithful Husbands

39. A woman is bound by law for as long as her man lives. Yet, whenever her man falls asleep,⁴⁵ she is free to marry whomever she pleases, only in the Lord. 40. However, she is advantaged, in my opinion, if she remains as she is. And I seem to have the Spirit of God [in this regard].

⁴² All of these instructions were Paul's attempt to spare believers from unnecessary trouble if the Great Tribulation should overtake them. This is consistent with Jesus' warning that families would be a snare to many believers in the last days, being betrayed by loved ones, (Micah 7:5-7; Matt. 10:21, 34-39; Matt. 24:10; Mark 13:12; Luke 12:51-53; Luke 21:16).

⁴³ A man is showing attention towards his fiancé [virgin] that he desires to consummate the marriage.

⁴⁴ A man who has determined not to consummate the marriage to the virgin to whom he has been betrothed, and has determined to preserve her virginity for her own sake (because of the "woes" that await pregnant and nursing women in the impending Great Tribulation), has done better both for himself and for the virgin to whom he is engaged. He has spared them both the grief of which Jesus warned.

⁴⁵ The "sleeping" metaphor used for death implies the hope of the resurrection of the righteous. "Sleep" is used in Scripture only of believers (Matt. 27:52; John 11:11; Acts 7:60; Acts 13:36; 1 Cor. 11:30; 1 Cor. 15:6,18,20,51; 1 Thess. 4:13-15; 2 Pet. 3:4). Therefore, this statement only addresses a woman married to a faithful believer.