

Live In Undivided Devotion To The Lord

1 Corinthians 7:1-40

Key Verse: 7:35

“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.”

In this passage Paul gives detailed instructions regarding marriage. Sometimes Paul shares Jesus' teaching. Sometimes Paul gives his own teaching out of fatherly concern and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Some teachings are hard to understand. We need a comprehensive biblical view of marriage to apply this passage wisely. In essence, Paul teaches us how to serve God in regard to marriage. Paul teaches us to live in undivided devotion to the Lord. It is for our good! Let's listen.

I. Paul's instructions on marriage in an immoral society (1-28)

Paul is writing a specific letter to the Corinthian church, dealing with questions they had asked. We know Paul's answer, but we don't know exactly what the questions were. Look at verse 1. At first glance, Paul says, "It is good for a man not to marry." However, according to reliable sources^{1/2}original Greek documents and Today's^{1/2} NIV^{1/2}as well as the footnote, the Corinthians had said to Paul, "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman."^{1/2} The Corinthians had an aversion to sex and marriage. Under the influence of Greek stoicism, some thought that to live a holy life required renouncing sex and marriage altogether. Some in our time have an aversion to sex and marriage; there are married people who do not fulfill their marital duties. But a more prevalent problem to us is that people don't^{1/2} marry because they don't^{1/2} want to commit to anything, or because they have experienced painful divorce somewhere in their family. To correct this, Paul lays down a general rule regarding marriage and conjugal relations.

Look at verse 2. ^{1/2}But since there is so much immorality [porneia], each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband.^{1/2} This is the general rule. A person should marry one partner of the opposite sex and live with them while on earth. Married people should enjoy conjugal relations and be satisfied with God's^{1/2} gift to them. Then they can overcome the temptation to indulge in sexual immorality, such as adultery, prostitution, or pornographic activity. In verses 3-4, Paul explains that the husband and wife should fulfill their marital duty to each other. Neither one should have a selfish view of this; it is not

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for their own gratification, but for mutual satisfaction; and it is becoming one in God. The well-known American phrase, "Not tonight, honey, I have a headache," should not be spoken in godly homes. In verse 5, Paul warns that neither one should deprive the other. Sometimes, in anger, one partner does so. This is selfish and mean. According to marriage counselors, it carries a danger of inciting illicit affairs.

The only time a husband and wife should suspend conjugal relations is to devote themselves to personal prayer. This may be done by mutual agreement, for a specified time. As soon as it is over, they should come together again. Otherwise they can be tempted by Satan. If they are divided, angry and fighting with each other, their prayers are hindered. However, as the two become one, their prayers are effective and powerful and they enjoy God's victory over the devil every day (1 Pe 3:7).

The Bible as a whole teaches that marriage is God's blessing upon mankind to live a happy and fruitful life for the glory of God. In Corinth Paul saw a further advantage of marriage: to avoid sexual immorality. This is why he calls it a concession, not a command (6). Then Paul deals with four specific categories of people.

What did Paul say to the unmarried and widows (7-9)? "It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I am" (8). Paul strongly advocated a celibate lifestyle. Paul was truly happy to live that way and did not envy married people at all. Paul was convinced that he could serve God better than others as a single man. However, Paul deeply acknowledged that this is a gift from God, echoing Jesus' own teaching (Mt 19:11-12). Those who have this gift should serve God in single devotion all their lifetimes. In UBF there is a beautiful example of one who did this: Mother Sarah Barry. When asked, "Why didn't you marry?" She said, "I didn't have time." She devoted herself fully to God's work. God blessed her with many spiritual children who are spread all over the world. On this Mother's Day, we offer sincere gratitude to God for Mother Sarah Barry. There are some other beautiful women of God among us who forego married life to devote themselves to God from their hearts. They have the image of Anna in Luke's gospel (Lk 2:36). Women who can live like them should. Men who can live like Paul should. Amen. Yet not everyone can. Look at verse 9. "But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion."

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What did Paul say to the married (10-11)? $\frac{1}{2}$ A wife must not separate from her husband. A husband must not divorce his wife. $\frac{1}{2}$ This is according to the word of the Lord. Jesus taught that the hidden motive for divorce is to marry someone else. Jesus called it adultery. In the United States one can divorce according to their caprice. This is legal, but if the motive is to marry a different person, it is adultery in the sight of Christ. In a Christian marriage, there can be no thought of divorce, even in a dream. Christ is the Lord of both partners and he does not permit divorce. If Christians divorce they are disobeying the Lord. Christ redeemed us from the power of sin and death to enable us to fulfill God's original high calling, including the establishment of holy families. Jesus said in Mark 10:8,9, $\frac{1}{2}$...the two will become one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate. $\frac{1}{2}$ To be sure, there are rough moments for every married couple. But when Christ is the Lord of the family they are rooted in an everlasting love and truth that unites them inseparably to bear much fruit for the glory of God. Therefore, if a believer has even a slight thought of divorce, he or she must repent immediately and ask God's mercy upon them.

What did Paul say to those who had unbelieving spouses (12-24)? This is more complicated. It is assumed that those mentioned here had married before becoming Christians, for the Bible strongly warns that believers must not marry unbelievers (2Co 6:14). In that situation, if the unbeliever is willing to live with them, the believer must not divorce (12). There are difficulties involved in a mixed marriage, but they must do their best to work it out. God regards their union as sanctified through the faith of the believer. Their children will share in God's blessing. Among us, some are serving God with all their hearts, even though their spouses do not share their faith. We only thank God for their faithful struggle which no one else can understand.

Look at verse 15. $\frac{1}{2}$ But if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace. $\frac{1}{2}$ Sometimes, unbelieving spouses can become the devil's instrument to destroy the faith of the believer. Their constant harassment is a fierce spiritual battle. Though it is painful to bear, the believer is not to seek a divorce in this case. However, if the unbeliever decides to leave, the believer should let them go. God wants his children to live in peace. We must acknowledge that believers have no control over the rebirth of others, even of spouses. Spiritual rebirth is God's sovereign miracle.

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Paul's comments about marriage in verses 1-16 are rooted in one basic principle. Let's read verse 17. Nevertheless, each one should retain the place in life that the Lord assigned to him and to which God has called him. This is the rule I lay down in all the churches. Simply speaking, Paul urges that Christians not exhaust themselves trying to change their marital status. Christ is Lord over us and our place in life is given by him. We must accept God's sovereignty and do our best to serve God as we are. Some single people think they will be happy and serve God better if they marry. While dreaming about their future marriage, they do not serve God. A married person may think that if they were single, they could serve God better. With that excuse they do nothing for God. Paul teaches us to accept our God-given place in life and serve God now, as we are.

To illustrate this principle further, Paul mentions in verses 18-24 circumcision and slavery. Whether one is circumcised or uncircumcised, slave or free, one is to regard his place in life as God-given. In verse 20 Paul says, Each one should remain in the situation which he was in when God called him. Again in verse 24 Paul says, Brothers, each man, as responsible to God, should remain in the situation God called him to. Slaves were in a most difficult and humiliating situation. But Paul says not to let that trouble them. Because they know Christ, they are free from the most terrible bondage of sin and death. They have the freedom to grow in faith and in inner character. God can use their situation to produce good fruits in them. However, those who always want to escape a painful or difficult situation do not please God. They miss the chance to grow spiritually through suffering. Some people are always looking for a better job when God wants them to learn how to overcome themselves, grow in character, and meet the challenge. It is sobering to realize that even slaves should accept their place in life and grow in faith instead of complaining and chafing to change their situation. Yet who knows? God may grant them freedom. Paul encourages a slave to gain his freedom if he can. In the flow of the Bible as a whole, it is clear that slavery is an injustice associated with the fallen world. The abolition of slavery has come about most often through the efforts of Christians. God will destroy all injustice as he brings his divine rule on earth as it is in heaven. However, sometimes individual believers are caught in unjust systems. When this happens, their primary concern should be to obey God, whatever he commands—not necessarily to become revolutionaries. Verse 19b says, Keeping God's commands is what counts.

Old Testament Joseph is a good example. Though he became a slave through tragic misfortune, he obeyed the word of God absolutely. As he did so, God worked in

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his situation to elevate him to a position of power and then to help his brothers repent and live for God's mission. This involved a lot of unjust suffering for Joseph. But he patiently bore it in obedience to God's word. As we allow God to work in and through us, through our obedience to his word, his perfect salvation will be fulfilled through us.

What did Paul say to virgins (25-28)? Paul encourages virgins to remain single. It is because there is a present crisis of dreadful events that occur before Christ comes in power and great glory. Jesus showed great concern for the plight of pregnant women and nursing mothers at the end of the age (Mk 13:17). Paul shared Jesus's concern. Virgins are free to marry; it is not sin. Yet Paul warns that those who marry have many troubles in this life.

II. Free from earthly concern (29-40)

Look at verses 29-31. The world in its present form is passing away. The things that concern us so much in this world will vanish. Marriage as we know it is limited to this world. We should not try to hold temporal things as if they last forever. Rather, we must put all our hope in the coming kingdom of God. Our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for our sins on the cross, has forgiven us and called us to eternal life in his kingdom. His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom. His kingdom is paradise. There are no tears, sorrows or pains, and no more death. We must live for his kingdom. We must do our best to prepare for his kingdom while living in this world.

In verses 32-34, Paul warns of the danger of a divided heart among married believers. Marriage demands husbands and wives to be concerned about each other. However, there is a danger that their concern can become worldly. Some people dream of endless romance without mission, or endless family gathering without mission. However, this leads to misery. When the family becomes an end in itself, it has lost connection with Christ. Then the marriage or the family takes one's heart from God. If our hearts are divided in this way, we cannot please God. This does not mean that married people should all divorce in order to serve God better; not at all. It is a warning that we must please God first in this perishing world.

We have seen a wonderful example of a godly house church through Dr. Samuel and Missionary Grace Lee. Though they devoted their family wholeheartedly to God and his mission, they cared for each other dearly and raised their children in

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the fear and love of God. Now their children are all living in blessed house churches and are serving God fruitfully, influencing the world. Another example is the Mayhew family. One missiologist believes that the Mayhews represent the longest and most persistent missionary endeavor by one family in all of Christian history. Thomas and Ana Mayhew came to America in 1631. God blessed their son Thomas Jr. to be a missionary to American Indians. He had one faithful convert, Hiacoomes, who became an evangelist, and 300 Indians came to the Lord in ten years. When Thomas Jr. died at sea, his father took over the mission at age 70 and served for 22 years until he died at 92. Then his grandson John took over the work. After him, fourth generation missionary, Experience Mayhew carried on. Without marriage, they could have served for one generation. But as a godly house church, they could serve for four generations.

Look at verse 35. $\frac{1}{2}$ I am saying this for your good, not to restrict you, but that you may live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord. $\frac{1}{2}$ Paul is teaching us the good life, the happy life, the most rewarding life. It is to serve the Lord in undivided devotion. Deuteronomy 6:5 says, $\frac{1}{2}$ Love the Lord your God with all you heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. $\frac{1}{2}$ God did not give us this command to burden us, but to bless us abundantly. God is the source of life and blessing. When we love God with all our heart, God blesses us. When a husband and wife love the Lord and are devoted to him, they can be blessed by God abundantly. They can serve God most fruitfully. One and one is not two, but eleven.

In the Bible as a whole, marriage is indeed significant. The Bible begins with the establishment of the first house church in Genesis 2. When Jesus performed his first miraculous sign, it was to bless a wedding at Cana in Galilee. The Bible ends with a spiritual marriage between the bridegroom, Christ, and his bride, the church, who enjoy the wedding supper of the Lamb in the glorious kingdom of God. Marriage is so beautiful and holy that Paul calls it a profound mystery (Eph 5:32). It mirrors the relationship between Christ and the church. In a house church, Jesus is Lord of all. The members love Christ with undivided hearts and Christ blesses the family with love and joy and peace. Then husbands love their wives as Christ loved the church. There is a beautiful example of Dr. J. Robertson McQuilkin, President Emeritus of Columbia International University in South Carolina. When his wife developed Alzheimers, he left his career and took care of her with love and sacrifice. In the Lord, wives serve their husbands joyfully. They never nag but always build up and encourage and strengthen their husbands. There is beauty, harmony, order, love and blessing overflowing.

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The best way to spread the blessing of God in our corrupted culture may be to fill the world with godly house churches. So we pray for 10,000 house churches to be raised in UBF for God's world mission purpose. To those who have already established house churches, let us today rededicate them to the Lord in undivided devotion. To those who have not yet established house churches, may God bless you to do so. To those who have decided to live like St. Paul or Mother Barry, may God bless you and use you powerfully.

Whatever our situation, we are most happy when we serve the Lord in undivided devotion. Let's decide to do so today. As we do, may God use us to make North America a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.