

# Study 9: 1st Corinthians Chapter 7

## **Introduction**

In chapter seven, Paul begins answering the specific questions that the Corinthians had asked him. The first concerned marriage – should we marry or remain unmarried? It is worth noting as we go through the chapter how Paul explicitly inserts his own advice into the chapter – and makes it perfectly clear what is his advice, and what are God’s commands.

## **Body of the Study**

### **Background to the chapter**

**How do we meet the needs of our husband / wife?**

**Should we remain unmarried?**

**What do you do about incompatibility?**

**What about marriage to a non-believer?**

**How should we approach entering into a marriage?**

**What about those who have never married?**

**Is it better not to marry?**

**Platonic relationships**

**What happens about the married person whose partner dies?**

## **Homework and preparation for next week:**

- *Think through some examples and applications of what Paul said here, that apply in our society today.*
- *What are the implications of this passage into the husband – wife relationship? How should we be helping the other partner?*
- Read the notes as a review of the study.

# Notes for study 9: Chapter 7

## Introduction

Paul begins answering the specific questions the Corinthians had asked. The first concerns marriage. The chapter is filled with practical application – although mixed with some more difficult issues.

## Body of the Study

### ***Background to the chapter***

The Corinthians asked Paul specifically about marriage – should we marry or remain unmarried? On the surface, this might seem an interesting question, particularly given the response of the disciples to Jesus' instruction on marriage (Mt 19:10), and a normal question that we might want to search out as a part of our christian growth – should we marry or stay single? In fact, the question that Paul was asked wasn't "*should we marry or remain unmarried?*" but rather "*should we engage in sexual activity?*" Put this question into the culture of Corinth and it presents a whole new set of dynamics!

Paul has already dealt with immoral sexual activity (most of chapter 5, and 1:6:15-20), and the predominant remaining area is sexual relations within marriage.

Paul says in 1:7:2 "*...to avoid fornication, let every man have his own wife, and let every woman have her own husband...*" (KJV) "*...since there is so much immorality...*" (NIV)

God expects us to keep our virginity for our marriage. All sexual relationships outside of marriage are fornication, whether it is pre-marital sex, or a marital affair after marriage. The latter is a special class of fornication "adultery" which "adulterates" (pollutes) the marriage. Paul tells us what to do about fornication in three words "flee sexual immorality" (1:6:18). Notice that in 1:6:16 he shows us that when we have sex outside of marriage, that we become "one" with our partner, and introduce a third person into the "one flesh" relationship. (THREE in the ONE FLESH relationship). Such is true for every sexual encounter (when we are married) outside of that marriage relationship.

Notice what Paul says we are to do about this: "*...To avoid fornication, EVERY MAN is to have his own wife, and EVERY WOMAN is to have her own husband...*"

Paul is not instructing every person in the church in Corinth specifically (since he says later in the chapter that it is better not to marry, as he has also said in verse 1). He is addressing those who are unable to control their sexual needs.

### ***How do we meet the needs of our husband / wife?***

We all need things to sustain life – air – food – water – money – a job – and importantly love and affection. The husband and wife are made for each other, and to help each other. And they are to meet the sexual needs of the other. The place for that fulfilment is in the marriage relationship. To avoid turning to a sinful relationship to meet our sexual needs, Paul says that we should each have our own husband / wife.

He tells us here about "two classes of people" who have the right to be married: *EVERY MAN* and *EVERY WOMAN*. [I have phrased this in this manner because there are many people who teach that there are THREE classes of people who have the right to marry (*which I do NOT agree with*): 1. The never married person. 2. The widow / widower who's partner has died. 3. The innocent party who divorced their partner because of the partner's adultery.] More on this later, I just needed to make the point whilst we are at verse 2!

*"...<sup>1</sup>CO 7:3 The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. <sup>4</sup> The wife's body does not belong to her alone but also to her husband. In*

*the same way, the husband's body does not belong to him alone but also to his wife...*  
(NIV)

We are to meet all of the sexual needs of our partner, and ensure that they are sexually satisfied. We are not to “sexually starve” our partners, for this could become the cause of them committing adultery. In fact, going back to Mt 5:32, a man “sexually starved out” his wife, she goes and has an affair outside of the marriage, then he divorces her because of her adultery. Paul is saying here in 1:7:3 that we are *NOT* to do that. He has already said in 1:6:18 that we are to FLEE from such temptation – don’t hang around there and be tempted *GET OUT OF THERE!!!*

*“...<sup>1CO 7:5</sup> Do not deprive each other except by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. <sup>6</sup> I say this as a concession, not as a command. <sup>7</sup> I wish that all men were as I am. But each man has his own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that...”* (NIV)

There are times when we need to seek solitude, and stop having sex for a time. This might be a time when we want to devote ourselves to God for a while. It could also be whilst the husband is away from home teaching and preaching (perhaps for several months). Paul says that we are to make sure when the time is over that you reconstitute your sexual relationship again, lest you get caught into a period where you are unable to control your sexual desires.

Notice here that Paul speaks expressly that this is a *CONCESSION*, not a *COMMAND*. Throughout this passage, Paul makes a *VERY CLEAR* distinction on what is commanded, and what is his judgement (which he has permission of God to say). By implications, everything else that Paul teaches is *NOT* Paul’s opinion, but is the commandment of the Lord. I don’t want to branch off on a study of scriptural authority, but 1 Cor 7 is an excellent example where Paul demonstrates that the things he is teaching are from God, and not his own thoughts.

Paul’s judgement is that it would be better if others remained unmarried (since he could serve God in a greater capacity, and without the restrictions that family responsibilities bring – he says a lot more on this later). To be able to contain one’s sexual desires is a gift from God – and we all have different gifts.

### ***Should we remain unmarried?***

Paul was not married (although he had the right to be so), and it is evident (from this chapter) that he thought he could consequently give himself to the Lord in a greater capacity by remaining single. Certainly having a wife would have restricted his travels, and would have weighed heavy on his mind as he faced the persecutions, stoning, shipwrecks, and jails.

*“...<sup>1CO 7:8</sup> Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I am. <sup>9</sup> But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion...”* (NIV)

The KJV just says, “it is better to marry than to burn”. There is a double reference here. One is to burn with passion and sexual desire (as translated in the NIV) but also to “burning in Hell” as the consequences of our sin. He is reinforcing here what he has said in verse 2 (my paraphrase) “...*If we cannot control our sexual desires, then every one of us should marry lest we commit fornication...*”.

### ***What do you do about incompatibility?***

This is a really practical problem. Paul doesn’t define what “incompatibility” is, but on the list is everything except adultery (the one exception that Jesus gave). The list would include domestic violence, constant arguing, we just don’t get along any more, we’ve drifted apart, and “because she burns the toast”.

*“...1CO 7:10 To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. <sup>11</sup> But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife...” (NIV)*

The reference here to a husband not divorcing his wife must be “in these circumstances” – that is because of “incompatibility” since Jesus has given us the only valid reason for divorce. Paul says that regardless of the problems, people should remain married. Nevertheless, Paul recognises that there are some circumstances where it is either NOT POSSIBLE to remain together, or it is NOT DESIRABLE to remain together (such as domestic violence – the husband is an alcoholic etc). He says that if the wife leaves, then she is to remain unmarried. If she can remain celibate, then she should stay that way. If she cannot remain celibate and needs to be sexually satisfied, she is to go back to her own husband.

Notice what is happening here:

1. A man and a woman marry (TWO in the ONE FLESH relationship)
2. The woman can't stand the husband (he beats her up, or HE burns the toast) (Still TWO in the ONE FLESH relationship)
3. She leaves and remains single (relief from her affliction) (Still TWO in the ONE FLESH relationship)
4. She is unable to remain celibate and goes back to her husband (Still TWO in the ONE FLESH relationship)
5. Alternately she marries someone else (or has a sexual relationship with someone else) (THREE in the ONE FLESH relationship, since the original relationship is still valid in God's eyes)

### ***What about marriage to a non-believer?***

Note that Paul says this is his Judgement, and not God's commands. What should a Christian do if they find themselves in a marriage to a non-believer? This is not an uncommon problem, and whilst there have been some circumstances where a christian has married a non-believer and converted the other, there have also been many circumstances where the non-christian partner has caused the christian to fall away. The best answer is to marry a christian (but even that is not always perfect, as one partner can fall away and give a hard time to the christian who is trying to be faithful).

*“...1CO 7:12 To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord): If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. <sup>13</sup> And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. <sup>14</sup> For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy...” (NIV)*

In 2:6:14 Paul tells us that we are “not to be unequally yoked together with unbelievers”. We can be yoked in many ways, including through a business relationship (this can create very difficult situations where the non-believer wants to cheat on his customers and the taxation department, but the christian wants to do what is right). We can also be yoked together by “contract” (the non believer can “rip off” the christian by exploiting the situation). But, by far the greatest yoke is the marriage yoke, and we (as christians) should not bind ourselves together with non christians. Note that 2:6:17 says that we should get out of that situation.

But, *I DO NOT* believe that Paul is saying here that we should get out of a marriage in such circumstances. For every rule there is the “general rule” and then there is the “exception to the rule”. For example in our English class : “ i before e except after c ” The exception does not negate the general rule. The general rule is that we should get out of being yoked together with unbelievers. The exception is where the yoke is a marriage. Paul gives us the rule for that situation here in 1 Cor 7: 12.

IF they are willing to stay together, they MUST NOT divorce (Why?: because God hates divorce!). You never know where this could lead (1:7:16). In fact, the unbeliever is “set apart” by the believer, and so are your children.

“...<sup>1CO 7:15</sup> *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.* <sup>16</sup> *How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?...*” (NIV)

I have seen several situations where one faithful partner has converted the other one. Who knows what the outcome could be? However Paul says that if the unbeliever is not happy to stay with the christian, they should “let him go”, and that the christian is “not bound” in such circumstances.

There is always a difficult passage in everything, and I guess that this is it! At first reading one would conclude that the one left behind is freed from the marriage (and hence free to remarry). However we need to “think through” the dynamics here.

1. A man and a woman marry (TWO in the ONE FLESH relationship)
2. The woman becomes a christian (Still TWO in the ONE FLESH relationship)
3. The husband isn't happy about the woman's “bible bashing him” and he leaves her. (Sort of the inverse of domestic violence!!!) (Still TWO in the ONE FLESH relationship)
4. He leaves and remains single (relief from her “affliction” on him) (Still TWO in the ONE FLESH relationship) (What has changed the original relationship from still being valid in God's eyes?)
5. He remarries someone else (or has a sexual relationship with someone else) (THREE in the ONE FLESH relationship).

One is drawn to two possible solutions here:

- Either she is **NOT** free to remarry unless *HE* has a sexual relationship with another woman first (because the original marriage is still valid in God's eyes), OR
- Paul is giving **ANOTHER** grounds for remarriage other than the *ONE EXCEPTION* that Jesus gave.

My personal thoughts are that it is the first, and I base that solely on the *ONE FLESH* analysis. I am well prepared to admit that I could be wrong here, and I am very interested in how others view this passage.

### ***How should we approach entering into a marriage?***

Paul now gives his advice regarding entering into marriage. The word “circumcised” should be read as “Jewish” / “being a Jew” and “uncircumcised” should be read as “a Gentile” / “being a Gentile”.

“...<sup>1CO 7:17</sup> *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.* <sup>18</sup> *Was a man already circumcised when he was called? He should not become uncircumcised. Was a man uncircumcised when he was called? He should not be circumcised.* <sup>19</sup> *Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God's commands is what counts.* <sup>20</sup> *Each one should remain in the situation which he was in when God called him.* <sup>21</sup> *Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you-although if you can gain your freedom, do so.* <sup>22</sup> *For he who was a slave when he was called by the Lord is the Lord's freedman; similarly, he who was a free man when he was called is Christ's slave.* <sup>23</sup> *You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men.* <sup>24</sup> *Brothers, each man, as responsible to God, should remain in the situation God called him to...*” (NIV)

Paul says that this is what he teaches *EVERYWHERE* (it is not a special rule for the church at Corinth). It is preferable to remain in the (married or unmarried) state in which we became christians. And not just the marriage state either – don't be concerned about your physical state of freedom or bondage – christianity is for everyone!

However, we cannot take this part of the passage out of context with any other scripture (and especially the same passage, where Paul gives us instructions in verse 2!

Paul is saying that it is good and desirable for people to remain celibate if they can. However if they cannot contain their sexual urges, then they should get married. *EVERY* person has the right to be married. (The only real issue is *WHO* do they have the right to be married to!)

### ***What about those who have never married?***

The question of who Paul is addressing when he talks about virgins is a vexed one, and many commentators have different views about it. Some regard it as how a man should treat his virgin daughters, but I think that Paul is addressing people in relationships who have remained celibate.

*“...<sup>1CO 7:25</sup> 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. <sup>26</sup> Because of the present crisis, I think that it is good for you to remain as you are. <sup>27</sup> Are you married? Do not seek a divorce. Are you unmarried? Do not look for a wife. <sup>28</sup> 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...” (NIV)*

These people have maintained their virginity, and so far they have been able to control their sexual desires. He says that it is better that they remain unmarried (and maintain their virginity (vs 1:7:2)) this is his judgement rather than a command of the Lord.

Further, it is his judgement that we should remain in the state we are in and remain married, or single (unless we are single and unable to control our sexual desires (vs 2)).

It is not sinful if we marry. Note Paul's repetitiveness here “if you do marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned.” By implication, the first reference is to those who marry who are *NOT* virgins. Paul is not advocating nor allowing that christians have sex outside of marriage (1:6:18), but is simply recognising that there are some who have already committed the sin of fornication – so what are they to do? Does this mean that because they are not virgins that they cannot marry? No!

Paul is *NOT* saying that a person who commits fornication and then gets married has not sinned. (ie He is *NOT* giving permission and saying that it is OK to have sex before marriage as long as you intend to get married, and that the act of marriage makes the premarital sex OK). What he is saying is that there is no sin in the act of marriage even if the person was guilty of fornication and hence was not a virgin. By implication here, finding on your wedding night that your wife / husband is not a virgin is not grounds for divorce. There is no sin in the act of marrying the person. Fornication is *ALWAYS* wrong, and is *ALWAYS* sinful. However we can be forgiven of this (and any other) sin if we repent and confess our sins. Note what he says in 1:6: 9 –11

*“...<sup>1CO 6:9</sup> Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the **sexually immoral (fornicators KJV)** nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders <sup>10</sup> nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. <sup>11</sup> **And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God...**” (NIV)*

## ***Is it better not to marry?***

Marriage will bring difficulties (which he goes on to explain in verses to follow), but we should try as hard as we can to live our life to Christ in the fullest sense (just as we would if we did not have a wife to distract us from Christ).

*“...<sup>1CO 7:29</sup> What I mean, brothers, is that the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they had none; <sup>30</sup> 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; <sup>31</sup> those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away...” (NIV)*

Life is short. Just make sure that you put Christ in the first place in your lives, and don't be distracted by the things of the world and our possessions.

*“...<sup>1CO 7:32</sup> 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. <sup>33</sup> But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world--how he can please his wife-- <sup>34</sup> 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. <sup>35</sup> 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...” (NIV)*

We need to put God first in our lives. When we are single, and don't have the distraction of wives and families, sometimes that is easier. A wife and family certainly would have been a distraction for Paul in his life of ministry and service. But it isn't always that way. A wife (or a husband for that matter) is *a helper*, and should help the other in their service for God. It isn't easy being single in having to do “everything” – the cooking, the washing, the shopping, the lawns, going to work, and our life of service and worship to God – let alone showing hospitality to others. Having someone else to share the load is a blessing. But family responsibilities can become a distraction from our service to God. It is really easy to get caught up in taking care of the necessary family things. The important message here is that we need to keep things in perspective, and keep our service to God clearly focussed as our first responsibility.

## ***Platonic relationships***

What about the person who has a “special relationship” with a woman? – a “Platonic relationship”, – people who are engaged or “engaged to be engaged” so to speak, and such may have been going on for years. There is no sex involved, because she is still a virgin. The problem is that “her biological clock is ticking”. So far, they have both served God in the fullest capacity without the family distractions that he has just spoken about above. What are they to do? They have both withstood the sexual temptations and do not “need” to marry to enable their sexual desires to be satisfied (since verse 2 covers that case).

*“...<sup>1CO 7:36</sup> 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. <sup>37</sup> 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. <sup>38</sup> So then, he who marries the virgin does right, but he who does not marry her does even better...” (NIV)*

## ***What happens about the married person whose partner dies?***

*“...<sup>1CO 7:39</sup> 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. <sup>40</sup> In my*

*judgment, she is happier if she stays as she is--and I think that I too have the Spirit of God..." (NIV)*

The marriage bond is broken when the partner dies (with the exception of Matt 5:32 / 19:9). However if we are to serve God the way he intends, then the ONLY way to get out of the marriage is when our partner dies. We are then freed from the marriage, and free to re-marry whoever we wish. But note that Paul says, "...but he must belong to the lord..." He is reinforcing here that christians should ONLY marry christians (as we have already discussed).

Paul's *judgement* is that it would be better if she remained unmarried (but he is also mindful of the need to have her companionship and sexual desires met (1:7:2)), and there are other issues that he discusses in 1 Tim 5:9-11. In this passage (Timothy) Paul is discussing the issue of the church financially supporting widows. Note what he says about the "younger widows":

*"...<sup>1TI 5:9</sup> No widow may be put on the list of widows unless she is over sixty, has been faithful to her husband,<sup>10</sup> and is well known for her good deeds, such as bringing up children, showing hospitality, washing the feet of the saints, helping those in trouble and devoting herself to all kinds of good deeds.<sup>11</sup> As for younger widows, do not put them on such a list. For when their sensual desires overcome their dedication to Christ, they want to marry.<sup>12</sup> Thus they bring judgment on themselves, because they have broken their first pledge..." (NIV)*

Paul recognises that they have sexual desires, and that this can be even greater than their dedication to Christ. He is *NOT* saying that they must not marry, but rather that by marrying they do not create trouble for themselves and the church.

*"...<sup>14</sup> So I counsel younger widows to marry, to have children, to manage their homes and to give the enemy no opportunity for slander..." (1 Tim 5:14 NIV)*

In fact, Paul instructs them to marry to "keep themselves out of trouble".

In conclusion, I want to notice that marriage is based on two principles:

1. Its PERMANENCE
2. Its PURITY

When its purity is broken (THREE enter the ONE FLESH relationship) then its permanence is also broken.