REMAIN IN GOD’S CALLING

1 Corinthians 7:1–40

Key Verse: 7:17

“Nevertheless, each person should live as a believer in whatever situation the Lord has assigned to them, just as God has called them.”

Have you ever heard of the saying, “The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence”? We tend to think that if only our life situation were different, things would be so much better. But often, when we get to the other side of the fence, we look back and the grass where we were now looks greener! In today’s passage Paul gives so many specific teachings on marriage and singleness. But he’s really teaching something bigger. What is it? It’s how to live as Jesus’ witness in our present life situation. So many single adults are longing to get married; some married adults may be longing to be single again. The only solution to these longings is to accept God’s sovereign rule and leading as his specific grace and calling to me, and start serving God right where I am. May God open our hearts and speak to us personally through his living word today.

Look at verse 1. Evidently the Corinthians had already written Paul a letter. Paul was the one who’d gotten their church started, but after he left, they found they still had many questions for him about what to believe and how to live as Christians. According to verse 1, one of their questions was about whether or not it was good for a man to be having sexual relations with a woman. In chapters 5 and 6 Paul had already mentioned an extreme case of incest in the church, and of Christian men justifying themselves for going to prostitutes. Those cases could tend to make people think negatively about the whole issue of sex.

How should we as Christians be thinking about sex? In the beginning God created Adam and Eve, and God brought them together. It says they became the example of the two becoming “one flesh”; it says they were both naked and felt no shame (Ge2:24,25). It means God created sex to be an exclusive experience between a husband and wife who are committed to each other for life. God intended sex to make the two into one, to unite them—not just physically but also spiritually. Paul had just quoted this verse in 6:16. After Adam and Eve sinned against God, people inherited a sinful nature, which warped everything good God had created, including sex. Because of sin, sex became a matter of selfish indulgence instead of an expression of selfless love. What’s worse, people started using sex outside of God’s moral laws. Sex came to be seen as dirty, shameful, even harmful. But that was not at all God’s original intention. ow

So why were the Corinthians asking if it were good not to have sex at all? Partly it was because their city was known as the capital of sexual immorality, kind of like our Las Vegas today. Both male and female prostitution were big business in Corinth. Some of the new Christians in Corinth had actually come out from that lifestyle (6:9–11). Partly, they were asking because sexual desire is something all people have in common, and as Paul says later in this chapter, it can be so overpowering that it can lead us into sinning against God. But there seems to be another reason they were asking this question. In their church there seems to have been a group of Christian women who were saying that, now that they had received the Holy Spirit, they were ultra-spiritual. They were brides of Christ waiting for him to come at any moment. They didn’t need to be taught by men, and certainly didn’t need to be having sex with them, even if they were their husbands. They were even encouraging other women to divorce their husbands or never get married at all. For them, life without sex was true spirituality.

How does Paul answer them? Look at verses 2–4. Paul gives several reasons why abstaining from sex in marriage is wrong. First of all, he says, “…since sexual immorality is occurring.” It’s a general expression that can mean many things. But it especially means here that married people are being tempted to sin sexually because it’s happening all around them. In their cultural it was seen as normal and natural to have sex outside of marriage. It can mean sex before being married, or sex with someone other than our spouse. In verse 2 the Greek word is literally *porneias*, from which our word “pornography” comes. We don’t have male or female shrine prostitutes like they did, but our culture is steeped in all kinds of pornography. People, even many Christians, resort to porn to have their sexual desires gratified. But it doesn’t please God. Paul taught elsewhere that we all should learn to control our sexuality in a way that is holy and honorable, usually within marriage, and not live in passionate lust like godless people, and thereby wrong or take advantage of others (1Th4:1–6). Of course there’s no guarantee that being married will prevent people from giving in to sexual temptation. But Paul is saying that abstaining from sex within marriage will only cause the marriage partners to be tempted even more.

The next reason Paul gives for why abstaining from sex within marriage is wrong is with his use of the expression “marital duty” in verse 3. Exodus 21:10 calls it “marital rights.” One of the essential meanings of being married is to have regular sexual relations—not just for producing children, but for the marriage union itself. Both parties have a right to it, and both parties have a duty to it. Refusing, for whatever reason, even for a spiritual sounding one, is not pleasing to God. In this same vein, in verse 4 Paul writes about having “authority” over one’s own body or “yielding” it to one’s spouse. We’d like to think that our body is own possession. But once we’re married, our bodies are no longer our own; they belong to our spouse as well. Abstaining from marital relations is like trying to exert this authority. Instead, Paul says to “yield” our body to our spouse. Why? Because it’s a practical expression of selfless love. It’s not just about duty; it’s about love.

Paul mentions a special case when abstaining within marriage is acceptable. Look at verses 5,6. The purpose here is important: so that the couple can devote themselves to prayer. It’s a kind of fasting prayer, so as to really concentrate. As believers we pray all the time. But there are certain times when we need to intensify our prayers. It may be during a crisis or when important decisions need to be made. But notice what Paul says here: “Do not deprive each other.” In Greek the literal word is “rob” or “defraud.” By using this word he’s strongly denouncing abstinence within marriage. He also says to abstain only “for a time,” meaning a specific, and probably, a short time. Finally, he says, “by mutual consent.” Both husband and wife have to willingly agree to this temporary abstinence; it can’t be a one-sided decision. In verse 5b Paul mentions how Satan can tempt us because of our lack of self-control. All married people need to humbly admit this and find refuge in God’s blessing of marriage. Paul doesn’t command abstinence for prayer, but mentions it only as a concession (6).

Look at verse 7. Paul was single, and he wished people could be like him, not because marriage or its intimacy is bad, but as we see later, so that that they could live in undivided devotion to the Lord and be wholehearted about God’s concerns to expand his kingdom (32–35). Our Lord Jesus also mentioned abstaining from marriage “for the sake of the kingdom of heaven,” and that only those who can accept it should accept it (Mt19:11,12). Paul says here that being either single or married is a “gift.” Singleness is a gift from God. Being married is also a gift from God. Instead of being negative, we should be thankful.

Look at verses 8,9. Here, “unmarried” can also mean “widower.” Paul is addressing those whose spouses have died. He encourages them to try to remain single, if they can, so as to serve the kingdom. But he also acknowledges that not everyone can control their sexual appetites, and for such people it’s fine to remarry. Singleness is not their gift, and it’s not good to just burn with passion.

Look at verses 10,11. Firstly, Paul says this is the Lord Jesus’ command. In his Sermon on the Mount, and when his disciples asked him about it, Jesus clearly forbade believers to divorce. But the verses here are unusual. Usually the New Testament forbids husbands to divorce their wives (Mt5:32; 19:8,9; Lk16: 18). But here, wives are forbidden to divorce their husbands! Clearly some women in this church had a problem with staying married. They thought they could be more spiritual if they just divorced “that guy.” But Paul says their options are either to remain separate from their spouse, and celibate, or to reconcile to their spouse. Jesus said the usual motive for divorce, despite all the other complaints they may have, is to commit adultery (Mt5:32; 19:9). So though these women thought they were ultra-spiritual, Paul suspected their deeper motive. To reconcile means to repent not only of bad behavior but also of bad motives.

In verses 12,13 Paul addresses another group in the church—those who had a non-Christian spouse. This probably happened because they were already married when Paul first shared the gospel, and only one of them came to believe. So this isn’t a justification to pursue an unbeliever as a marriage partner. It seems some of the “super-spiritual” people were advising these folks to just divorce. Paul says no and to stay in the marriage. Why? It’s because the spouse is still willing to live together with the believing spouse. It means he or she is not opposed to the gospel. The believer brings the hope of salvation to the marriage and their children and so should stay (14). On the other hand, if the unbelieving spouse tries to force the believing spouse to stop practicing the faith, threatening to leave, then Paul says to let them go (15,16). It might happen, but we never know if a believing spouse will ever convert an unbelieving spouse.

Read verse 17. This is Paul’s major point. Whether we’re married, or widowed, or married to a non-Christian, or single, or engaged, or divorced, we shouldn’t try to escape our situation, or change it, but remain in it. Paul repeats this point again in verses 20 and 24. He says God calls us to our life situation. God assigns it to us. Our modern impulse is to improve our lives by any means. It can be good, as Paul encourages slaves to try to buy their freedom in verse 21. But many people take this to an extreme. People try to avoid all kinds of suffering, even small inconveniences. Yet God works to use our situations in many ways. Often the hardships of our situation can mold our Christ-like character (Ro5:3,4). Also, when we receive Christ and are changed by him, we’re in a unique position to be a blessing to the real people around us in our situation. When we don’t change our situation, regardless of the hardships, but stay because of our faith in Jesus, people around us can be moved. Paul says in verse 17 to “live as believers.” In Greek it literally says to “walk” or “conduct oneself.” That’s how we let the light of Jesus shine in and through us. Whether we’re married, widowed, engaged, single or divorced, we should be letting the light of Jesus shine through our lives to those closest to us. Just as it’s moving for a slave laborer to stay in his or her situation joyfully, by faith in Jesus, so it’s moving for a believer to stay in any hard situation with great joy because of Jesus (21–23). In verse 24 it literally says to remain in our situation “with God.” God becomes our comfort and source of strength in any difficult situation.

In verses 25–28 Paul addresses singles. He encourages them to stay as they are—engaged or not. He mentions “because of the present crisis.” Some think this may be some kind of extreme famine going on at the time Paul wrote this letter. Others think it might have been a new storm of persecution against Christians that was brewing. Paul wanted to spare people from having their wedding plans ruined by unexpected and intense hardships. He adds in verse 29 that “the time is short.” It can mean many things. But to all of us, it also means that the chances to live our lives for Christ are indeed short.

How should we then live, and why? Read verses 29–31. We are called to a healthy detachment from this world and all its fading joys and sorrows, by keeping our focus on the kingdom of God, which will never pass away. It’s so easy to be engrossed in this world and our human affairs. As we live with both feet firmly on the ground, we also need to keep our minds and hearts set on things above, on our living hope in Christ and his kingdom. In verses 32–34 Paul urges us to live in “undivided devotion to the Lord.” We can do that, in fact, whether we’re single or married. How? Married couples just need to get on the same page, heart to heart, that they both really want to serve the Lord. What a beautiful marriage that is, when both partners are living in undivided devotion to the Lord! In verses 36–38 Paul permits engaged men to either go ahead and get married, or break it off due to their newfound faith in Jesus. In verse 39 he encourages widowed women to go ahead and remarry a believing man, or ton remain single like him.

Read verse 17 again. May God bless us to accept his sovereign rule and leading in our lives even to this day. May God help us to accept our situation as his special blessing, his gift of grace, and his unique calling. May he help us to live as believers in our real life situation, whether married or single, and be a Christ-like influence to all those around us.