

1 Corinthians 7:1-17-40

Introduction

The rest of chapter 7 deals more generally with the subject of marriage. Paul discusses remaining where you are on conversion, then more about marriage, and the benefits of remaining single.

Continuing in present status

Paul has already argued that if, on conversion, a man or woman realizes that they are married to someone who is not sharing their faith, they must continue in that marriage. If it ends, it is the non-Christian's responsibility to end it, and not the Christian's. Now he says more on this subject.

The principle is **Each one should retain the place in life that the Lord assigned to him and to which God has called him** (1 Corinthians 7:17). This is the rule for all Christians. If a Jew, continue as a Jew. If a Gentile, continue as a Gentile. Do not try to change your nationality. If a slave, continue as a slave, even if given the chance of freedom. If you are free, continue as such, but remember you are Christ's slave, bought with a price.

The nature of conversion, "being called", involves hearing the Lord's calling of us to Himself. What does it mean, and what does it not mean?

In our moral and spiritual life, there is a radical change. The power of God comes into the life. There is a total change in outlook and values. But the external and ordinary life in the world does not necessarily change. We are still married, living in the same home, same bank balance, same position in the family, same nationality, same job. The only reason for change in these areas would be if you were in a job that was immoral, dishonest, evil, ruining the lives of others.

The question arises, on becoming a Christian, do we have to leave work and do specifically "Christian" work. No, you can serve God where you are, and with your gifts. The same home and job, but now consecrated to the Lord. Do it as unto the Lord. Be a missionary where you are. You may be called to "Christian" work one day, but first you need the experience of proving self as Christian where God has placed you.

Further teaching on marriage

Paul is reluctant about commending marriage. In fact, he wishes all were like he is. Married people, if not careful, can be distracted from the things of the Lord because of their efforts to please their partners and domestic responsibilities. He says he would like people to be single because of the present crisis. Was this the expectation of the Second Coming? Probably referring to trouble from outside – persecution and death. Better to be unmarried and without children when trouble is about, because it adds to anxiety and responsibilities. A man can be a hero on his own, but he becomes a

coward when he thinks of his widowed wife or orphaned children. “Children sweeten labours, but make misfortunes more bitter.” Paul is not saying marriage is wrong, but there are advantages in being single because of present distress.

Then Paul gives strange advice about man behaving improperly to a virgin he is engaged to, or his virgin daughter (1 Corinthians 7:36). There is much debate here. Does he mean a man and his fiancée? The RSV uses “betrothed”. Is he advising them to get married? Or is he referring to a spiritual marriage (known at the end of the second century) where man and woman are in a spiritual marriage but not in physical sense, i.e. union of spirit, but not of bodies? Such a situation produces intolerable strain and tension, in an abnormal situation. Is Paul telling couples in such a situation to go ahead and get married in the full sense, to stop behaving unnaturally, and stop repressing their instincts? Or is this a reference to a father with a daughter, or perhaps a ward, who is **getting on in years**? Is he recommending that such a woman should be encouraged to marry, lest she get caught up in the moral dangers of Corinth?

Then a final word to widows. Marriage is a permanent bond. Women are bound to their husbands while they are alive, but the contract ends at death. Then they are free to marry again – but he cautions them that it must be “in the Lord”. Remarriage is not disrespect to the first partner, but highest compliment to the first partner. Widows can remarry as long as to a Christian, but Paul would prefer that they remain single.

The Christian and the single state

Marriage is the norm, but not for all. Paul was not so, and thus he was freer to do his work. He felt it was better being single in present circumstances. Now we are going to look at the matter from the wider perspective of Scripture.

Some are not married for the sake of the Kingdom of God. The demands of their life in Christian work means they are exposed to dangers and problems. Some people think this is a terrible tragedy, since everyone ought to be married, at any price. But it is perfectly possible to be unmarried and happy, fulfilled and able to serve the Lord in ways that are otherwise impossible.

The accomplishments of some unmarried people are most noteworthy, especially where their role and place in life was only possible because they were single. Martin Luther eventually married, but his greatest work as a protestant reformer was done while single. Florence Nightingale, who said to God at the age of thirty, “Let me think only of Thy will”, could never have achieved what she did for nursing if she had been married. Many pioneer missionaries, male and female, made outstanding contributions to evangelism in dangerous and difficult circumstances, which would have been quite impossible if they were married or with children to care for.

And just think what some people might have achieved, but for a hasty marriage outside God’s will. Have known of men who have felt a call to the mission field, but have married women without the same calling, and so they have not answered that call. They have missed God’s best; they are not half the men they could have been.

Conclusion

God has a plan and purpose for each one. In that plan and purpose there is peace and happiness. For many that plan means marriage. But not for all. Many have lived full and satisfying lives single. At the same time, their single state has not made them more holy or pleasing to God.

We all need to walk with God. It is possible to miss God's plan and miss God's best. Daily walk is essential. We are all different in our needs, temperaments and opportunities. God's will is not the same for all. Whatever He requires, He gives the grace. God's will is good, acceptable and perfect. Seek first God's Kingdom and His righteousness.

*“He knows, He loves, He cares...
He gives His best to those
Who leave the choice to Him.”*