



This past week, one of my boys purchased a computer for himself. I was driving with him in town when his tower came in the mail and he received the text from Tracy saying it had arrived. He was overjoyed. He couldn't wait to get home to put it all together. I was excited for him, but when I got back home, I needed to go back out. I received a text from him while I was away and then I received a video message from him asking when I was coming home. We talked via video, and he was about to show me the tower, but he said he wanted to wait to show me in person. Finally, I got to see it, and it definitely was very cool. The next morning, I walked by the box of the tower. I looked inside and saw one of my cats. I laughed because a box seems like one of the greatest gifts you can give a cat. He couldn't care less about the tower. What about this amazing box that'll allow him to hide?! But imagine if Samuel received the tower in the box and he didn't care about the tower? What if he took the tower out and tried to fit in the box? I'd say there's something wrong with him. He's not engaging with the gift in the right way. He's misunderstood, and as a result, he's missing out. This is the reality of the Corinthians (and for us as well) as it relates to marriage, singleness and the sexual union.

The main idea of the sermon today is **Recognize the gift God has given to you, whether singleness or marriage, and live accordingly.** Whether you're married or you're single, we need to recognize the gift we've been given and then live accordingly. I think sometimes we fail in this understanding. We can think if someone's not married, something's wrong. We can elevate marriage and make those who are single feel like lesser citizens in God's Kingdom. Or, we can emphasize singleness so as to downplay marriage. Neither response is correct. Neither acknowledge the gifts they are intended to be by God. We don't want to be like a person jumping into a box and ignoring the real prize! And, I can't help but wonder if many people are dissatisfied because they're not really enjoying the gift. They're focused on the wrapping and the box.

So, today, I have two points. First, recognize the gift God has given to you. Second, live out the gift accordingly. Let's start with the first point:

1. Recognize the gift God has given you (vv. 6-7).

Let's read verses 6-7 again: ⁶Now as a concession, not a command, I say this. ⁷I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another. ¹

You might be tempted to think, "But what does a 2,000 year-old document have to do with today." Well, within the Roman culture, they had very similar view to what many Americans think regarding sex, marriage, and singleness. In addition, and this is more important, this document was given to us by God in order to be applied to every culture! But, let's get back to the culture. There are writings in the ancient world that summon people to great self-control, rejecting their natural desires and treating them as a bane to be overcome. Then there were others who thought they should be completely

¹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Co 7:6–7.

recognized. This is the problem in Corinth. Some seem to have thought it was ok to go to the temple prostitutes while others said, "It's better to not have sexual relations with women." Culturally speaking, let me quote from someone in the ancient realm, Achilles Tatius. He wrote, "However angry you make me, I still burn with love for you. . . . Make a truce with me at least for now; pity me. . . . A single consummation will be enough. It is a small remedy I ask for so great an illness. Quench a little of my fire" (as quot. in Garland, p. 274). One commentator writes, "**Overpowering sexual desire only necessitated having sex, not marriage.**" Yet, for "Paul, the fire is not to be doused by fleeting, elicited sexual encounters or by grim repression of natural sexual desire. It calls for marriage" (Garland, p. 275).

How much do we see our own culture within Corinth? The "super-spiritual" who think to reject the physical and then the "super-physical" who embrace hedonism. It makes for a mess when we think of our own state as whether married or single. And confusion abounds if God's glory in Christ isn't central. So, Paul works to bring the people back to center. And in verses 6-7, he emphasizes a very important point: Marriage and singleness are a gift. But before he says that, he makes an potentially odd statement in verse 6: Now as a concession, not a command, I say this. The sentence structure even in English might lead to confusion. Is he referring to verse 7 or what he said earlier? I don't believe he's talking about what he's going to say. I believe he's referring to what he said earlier, particularly verses 2-5. If you mark in your Bible, draw a line from verse 6 to verse 2, where we start reading, "² But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband."² So, verse 6 is essentially, "I now say this now as a concession, not a command. In other words, he's not saying that all people must be married. While he would actually agree that it can be "better" to not have sexual relations with a spouse, he's not saying that's the principle for everyone.

Why? Because singleness and marriage are both gifts of God. You see, what the Corinthians were trying to do was they were continually trying to figure out the best way to be the most spiritual. Best preacher – check; best way to climb to the top in the church – check; best way to avoid fleshly impulses – check (don't have sexual relations). But that was a very legalistic approach to spirituality. You see, God isn't simply interested in us doing all the "right" things. God wants our hearts. God is relational. Do you want him? And, do you want to glory in his glory and reveal that in your life? Well then, that means you have some gifts others don't have. And others have some gifts you don't have. But that's ok and good because that reveals to us that God is uniquely personal towards us! How amazing, right? We can't simply say to everyone, "No marriage" or "All marriage." Instead, we believe verse 7: But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another.³

By the way, Paul does admit that he wishes all were like him, and he'll explain why later. So, I'm not going to address that at this point, but clearly he's grateful for his gift of singleness. But not to the point of enforcing that on everyone because each person has been given their own gift from God, whether that's marriage or singleness.

So, think of this like God, the all-glorious, all-powerful, all-loving Creator who has saved you from an eternity's worth of Hell and promised eternal glory to all of you who have turned from your sin and turned to Jesus for rescue. And this God has gifted you with your state of singleness or marriage. You have it in your hands. You stare at the box. Some of you think, "I don't like this." But you're more focused on the box than on what's inside. So, let's open it up a little and see how Paul challenges us to live accordingly with our gifts.

² [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Co 7:2.

³ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Co 7:7.

2. Live out your gift accordingly (vv. 8-16).

To those who are single (vv. 8-9):

Let's start by reading verses 8-9: ⁸To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single, as I am. ⁹But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion. ⁴

Paul starts by talking to those who are unmarried. Two verses that are very basic. But I want you to notice the words "good" and "better" here in these verses. These words show up multiple times in this chapter, and it's a consistent theme with the Corinthians as they are trying to know what is the "best" thing to do. Again, they're looking for a one-size-fits-all approach to Christianity, but Paul reveals it's not that simple. Certainly there are many commands of God in the Word that apply to all: don't murder, don't covet, love your neighbor. But there are a lot of other things that can vary from person to person. This is one of those issues. While everyone is to kill sexual sin in their lives, our approach to the sexual union can be different depending on the gift. So, Paul starts with the unmarried and those who had been married but their spouse died. He believes it's "good" to remain single if they can, as Paul is. Singleness isn't to be looked down upon. If someone can remain single, great! That's a good thing. But, Paul adds this caveat in verse 9 that would confront the Corinthian's letter. If the single cannot exercise self-control, they should marry – and that's better. Meaning, it's better than good.

At this point, you could think Paul is looking down on the single person who lacks self-control, like Paul is saying [reads judgmentally]: But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. . . . That's not how Paul is talking. Instead, he's admitting something that's taught in the Scriptures. Human beings are sexual beings. Many humans were not meant to exercise self-control sexually. God did not create them that way.

Singleness may not be lifelong. This means that if you are single and you have sexual desires, that might indicate you don't have the gift of singleness. Now, that doesn't mean that you're going to find Mr. or Mrs. Right within the next few weeks, years or even decades. But that desire is not sinful. It's what you do with that desire that can be sinful. If you cannot exercise self-control, you should marry. Again, this doesn't mean marry right away.

Seek a spouse who professes Christ. When I was a child, I recall a man and woman in our church family who divorced. The husband was in sin and left his wife and children. The wife sought the Lord and seemed to love him dearly. She went a while not being married and yet longed for marriage. Then a man, who I think was an unbeliever, swept her off her feet. I don't know what justifications she made, but she made them. I saw this in an older woman as well. And I've heard some people say, "Where in the Bible does it say we must marry a Christian?" The very end of this chapter, Paul says in verse 39, "if her husband dies, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord."⁵ Why? Why is this so important? Well, in verse 35, Paul states his desire. He's not just trying to make unnecessary rules. He says, ³⁵ **I say this for your own benefit, not to lay any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord.**⁶ The point of all of life is to reveal and grow in your devotion to the Lord. Because marriage affects your entire life, the desires ought to be that, as

⁴ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Co 7:8–9.

⁵ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Co 7:39.

⁶ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Co 7:35.

much as possible for you, you seek to marry a believer. So, if you are unmarried, don't be content with the first person who likes you. First, you be the kind of person God calls you to be – godly, Christ-centered. And then you want to find a person with whom you can grow in the Lord together. Why? Because Jesus is your wisdom. He's done all to rescue you. He's saved you from wrath and given you eternal life and hope! Has he saved you? Do you know Jesus? Have you turned to him alone as the one who rescues you and reconciles you to God because he satisfied the Law's demands on the cross? If so, glorify God in your body.

But what about this "lack of self-control," and the statement that it's better to marry than to burn? It almost sounds like an excuse. I mean, some people could say, "I'm going to sexual sin because I'm not married. Even Paul acknowledges that this is difficult. And God hasn't given me a spouse, so I guess it's ok to dabble in sexual sin every once in a while." No. Ephesians 5 says "Let there not be even a hint of sexual immorality. . . ." Not even a hint! Paul is giving an explanation, not an excuse. We are made as sexual beings. Some have been given the gift of singleness for life. But most people have been given the gift of singleness for a time. Therefore, if you have the gift of singleness, recognize the gift. And yet, if you have sexual passions, I would recommend you pray and seek to find a spouse – not because the spouse is your end-all and be-all, but because God may have the gift of marriage for you. And to those who say, "I have those desires, but God hasn't given me a spouse," my heart is burdened for you. I will pray for you and lament before the Lord. "How long?" "Why, Lord?" In this, I will pray for your self-control so that you reveal your devotion to the Lord in all things. Now, let's move on

To those who are married (vv. 10-16):

Ok, so if Paul exhorts the people to marry fellow believers for their greater spiritual growth, then would it be better to divorce if you're not married to an unbeliever? Or, you could even think, "Am I doomed to lesser spirituality?" Both of these ideas are going to be answered for you in a moment. Others of you may think, "But my marriage has just lost its glimmer. I don't love him or her anymore. Is it ok to divorce if we just don't feel the love anymore?" That question is answered in verses 10-11. Paul's first principle to those who are married is:

Stay married (vv. 10-11).

Read verses 10-11 with me again: ¹⁰To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband ¹¹(but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife. ⁷

The word for "separate" here applies to the Roman culture's idea that refers to divorce. This is not American legal separation. God's standard is marriage until death do us part. I've mentioned this before, but I love Dietrich Bonhoeffer's statement regarding marriage, when he was performing a wedding ceremony for a friend. He said: **It is not your love that sustains the marriage, but from now on, the marriage that sustains your love.** If your feelings are down and dry, feeling out-of-love or even a host of other trivial reasons, should not be a justification for divorce. But keep in mind two things: 1) Paul is going to admit later that there can be just divorces. We'll get to that later, and 2) God doesn't simply want people to not be divorced. You can be "not divorced" and have a God-dishonoring marriage. Ephesians 5 reveals to us how we ought to fight for joy in our marriage. Fight for God's glory in our marriage. We should always seek to reveal Christ and the church in our marriages. God has gifted us with this marriage. God has gifted us with our specific spouse. Will we engage with the gift he's given to us or will we focus on the box and say we wish it were different? May we not dishonor our Lord!

⁷ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Co 7:10–11.

By the way, Paul does say in this text if the spouse has separated and they were in the wrong, if possible, you should seek reconciliation. Why? Because what has Christ done for you? There is a church member here who divorced a spouse decades ago, and a few years ago was convicted that they never sought reconciliation – never asked for forgiveness. This member is married to another, but this individual came into my office as they asked for forgiveness and with tears said they forgave them. We live this way because we don't want to dishonor our Lord. And, if we did by breaking the marriage covenant, we should seek forgiveness – and if the other spouse is unmarried, maybe you could be married again if they were to allow it. So, the first principle is stay in the marriage. If you have been given a spouse, this person is a gift meant for the rest of your life. This isn't the same as singleness. Singleness is not the state for most people, for the rest of their lives. But marriage ought to be. Then we see

Stay with an unbelieving spouse (vv. 12-16). It seems possible, if not probable, that Paul is speaking of this scenario because Christianity was new in Corinth. Many people who believed may have been married to a spouse who didn't embrace the Christian message. This could cause a lot of issues, especially in the Roman government. Romans taught that whatever the husband believed, the entire household ought to embrace. That means the husband could force his beliefs on the rest, and also that the wife's beliefs were not as important. The message here reveals that the husband ought not to force his beliefs, nor should the wife capitulate to the husband in this matter because she's called to worship the Lord.

For some Christians they may have just thought it easier to divorce than to create this type of divide that would be felt within their homes. In addition, Paul's going to call them to marriage in the Lord for great effectiveness in growth in godliness. So, are those who have unbelieving spouses missing out spiritually? That would be a wrong conclusion to make, and I'm so grateful for these verses because we have a number of people in our church family who have unbelieving spouses. God knows you. God has words for you that I hope will be like a salve for your soul.

First though, let me skip ahead to verse 15 because I think it helps to frame the other verses: ¹⁵ **But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace.** ⁸ If the unbelieving spouse wants a divorce, Paul says you're not guilty of sin. Don't take the blame on yourself. Then he says that the brother or sister is not enslaved. That was Jewish divorce verbiage meaning that the marriage is over in the sight of God and to not be enslaved means that you are free to remarry. So, this is why people will say that desertion is a legitimate cause of divorce and also you're free to remarry in these scenarios. But then Paul says "God has called you to peace." I actually wish this sentence was part of a new paragraph. I don't believe Paul's primary point is, "Don't fight the divorce because God has called you to peace." I actually think this sentence is describing what comes next, which is Paul giving more reasons why you should stay together.

This phrase "called you to peace" probably refers back to the time God drew you together in marriage with your spouse. God called you to a peaceful union. If you were both unbelievers, God knew what would happen later. If you maybe sinfully pursued the spouse while being a believer, God was still sovereign over that. Either way, every marriage is under God's providence. He called you to peace – which means that you ought to then live on that mission – showing God's peace in Christ to your spouse through your actions, demeanor, love, graciousness, pursuit of the Lord, and your words. God has called you to peace! Then what does this look like?

⁸ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Co 7:15.

Let's read verses 12-16 again: ¹²To the rest I say (I, not the Lord) that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. ¹³If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. ¹⁴For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. ¹⁵But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace. ¹⁶For how do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife? ⁹

First, why does Paul say that he's saying this and not the Lord? The point is that there are some things that the Lord Jesus clearly taught when he was on this earth. Paul is actually emphasizing his authority as an apostle here. He has the Spirit working through him with authority. Even though Jesus didn't comment on this scenario, he has authority under Jesus to speak.

Now, we move on. Paul says that a husband who has an unbelieving wife should not divorce her, and vice versa. As long as the other spouse is good with staying married, great! Stay together. "But we don't have the same Lord?" Well, keep in mind that marriage is a gift of God, and marriage is a gift to the world. While you may long for your spouse to know the Lord – the gift is still there specifically for you. And you can still celebrate that gift and enjoy your spouse to God's glory!

Paul now moves on to reasons why you shouldn't divorce. These aren't all the reasons, but these are some encouragingly weighty reasons:

Why?

The spouse is drawn closer to God's presence (v. 14a). Read the beginning of verse 14 with me again: ¹⁴For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband.¹⁰

What in the world does this mean? In this verse we have the terms "holy" and "unclean." Immediately our minds should be drawn back to the Mosaic sacrificial system where God has holiness and cleanliness laws. Holiness did not necessarily mean that someone was saved. A utensil in the temple was made for holy service, but that doesn't mean the utensil was going to Heaven! Similarly being clean or unclean didn't necessarily mean you were saved. These terms meant that you could be placed closer to the presence of God. And, this is at least part of the idea that I think Paul is purporting here. Paul teaches us that we as individuals and as the church are the temple of God. The Spirit dwells in us and therefore we are the holy of holies! That's the word for "temple" that Paul uses in the previous chapter.

So, here's the reality for you Christian spouse. Every time your unbelieving spouse is in your presence, they are brought closer to God's presence than if you divorced them. What a privilege you've been given. But it's not just when your spouse is in your presence. By the fact that you are *one* with your spouse, they are joined more closely to God's presence. That doesn't mean they are saved. They're still unbelievers, but God's kindness is meant to lead to repentance. God is being very kind to them by placing you as a gift in their life – and God is very kind to you by allowing you this opportunity. You may

⁹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Co 7:12–16.

¹⁰ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Co 7:14.

not have taken it by choice, but it's a gift nonetheless. So, stay with your unbelieving spouse because they're drawn closer to God. Paul also adds another reason:

Your children are drawn closer to God's presence (v. 14b). The end of verse 14 says, "Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy."¹¹ Why "otherwise?" If you leave, and the spouse keeps the children, how will the children know the Lord? Again, your presence brings the presence of God into the lives of your spouse and your children! Paul is speaking very missionally here. God has placed you there on mission to shine forth his glory. And you can say, "This sounds overwhelming." Yep. But I'm grateful that in anything God calls us to, he doesn't say, "Trust your strength. You got this." He says to us, "My grace is sufficient for you." Even Paul said of his own ministry, "Who is sufficient for these things?" Oh, God's strength is made perfect through our weaknesses. Even through your weakness and sin, he shines brightly through your weakness to reveal his power.

God might save your spouse (v. 16). Then Paul ends with hope in verse 16: ¹⁶For how do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife? ¹² Paul isn't promising that your spouse will be saved. But he simply says, "How do you know that God won't lead them to salvation?" Maybe people were more despairing than they ought to have been. Paul puts hope out there. As I think about these words, I'm reminded of Lorraine Palmer. Here's someone who came to Christ as an adult. Her husband was an unbeliever. She never felt she was amazing spiritually, but a little while later, her husband came to faith in Christ. He said the change in her life led him to take Jesus seriously. He believed on the Lord, and when she was 45, he died. She's been without a spouse for almost 50 years. She remained single after that marriage, but one of her most quoted statements is "As for God, his ways are perfect." What a testimony to all of us. Whether single or married. Whether married to a believer or unbeliever, as for God his ways are perfect.

God's design is to draw people to himself. God's design is to reveal the glory of Jesus through your singleness or your marriage. Are you determining to know nothing but Jesus Christ and him crucified? Wherever you're at, consider your heart. Where's your worship? Who's your wisdom? Where's your will?

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Fee, Gordon. *TNICNT: The First Epistle to the Corinthians, Revised Edition*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014.
2. Garland, David E. *ECNT: 1 Corinthians*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003.
3. Um, Stephen. *Preaching the Word: 1 Corinthians*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015.

¹¹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Co 7:14.

¹² [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Co 7:16.