

# 1 CORINTHIANS 7:25

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Turn in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 7. In chapters 1–6 we’ve seen that Paul was responding to reports that he received about the Corinthian church. First he addressed a report that he received about divisions in the church. So he focused on the need for church unity in the first four chapters. Then he dealt with a report that he received about a man sleeping with his stepmother. So he taught on the need for church purity in chapters 5–6. But then in chapters 7–16 Paul started responding to a letter from the Corinthian believers. In chapter 7 and verse 1 Paul made a reference to the matters that they wrote about. And in the rest of this letter he addressed a variety of topics that they asked him about in their letter.

So in the first 24 verses of chapter 7 Paul focused on the theme of marriage. I think he chose to address this topic first because it flows very smoothly from chapters 5–6. There he was talking about improper sexual behavior, and then in the beginning of chapter 7 he was focused on the proper place for sexual intimacy. But apparently there were married couples in the Corinthian church who were abstaining from sexual relations. And so Paul started this chapter by telling them to stop depriving each other. He said that a husband and wife have authority over each other’s bodies when it comes to sexual intimacy.

Then in verses 10–16 Paul addressed with the issue of divorce. First he said that a husband and wife should not get divorced. But then he dealt with the situation of a believer being married to an unbeliever. And he said that the believer is not allowed to get a divorce if the unbeliever is willing to stay married. But Paul did mention one exception to this rule in verse 15. He said, “But if the unbeliever leaves, let him leave. A brother or a sister is not bound in such cases.” So if the unbeliever wants to leave the marriage, then the believer should not offer any resistance. Instead the believer should tolerate the divorce and go along with it. And once the divorce is finalized, the believer is no longer bound but has God’s permission to get remarried to someone else.

Then in verses 17–24 Paul gave a general rule that we should remain in the situation that we were in when God called us to salvation. And Paul gave two illustrations in this passage to show us how to apply this rule. The first one was circumcision, and the second one was slavery. But there are exceptions to this general rule. Timothy got circumcised before he joined Paul’s missionary team. And Paul said here that a Christian slave should become free if possible. But Paul’s main point here was that it doesn’t matter whether a Christian man is circumcised or not. And it doesn’t matter whether a believer is a slave or not. Our spiritual status is what really matters. All Christians have been set free from slavery to sin, and now we’re slaves of Christ. He bought us with his precious blood when he died on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins.

But Paul's main reason for giving his general rule in verses 17–24 was not to focus on circumcision and slavery. Instead he was applying this rule to the situation of a believer being married to an unbeliever. And his main point was that believers in that situation should not try to become single. God doesn't view them as less holy just because they're married to an unbeliever. God wants them to stay married if the unbeliever is willing. And then they should strive to be a good testimony to their spouse. So our focus should not be on changing our marital status. There's certainly nothing wrong with a single person getting married in most circumstances. But single people should be careful not to get consumed with the desire to get married. Ultimately it doesn't matter whether we're single or married. We can serve the Lord faithfully in either one of those situations. We need to stay focused on pleasing the Lord and living in obedience to him.

Now we're ready to cover some new material and move on to our next section in this letter. Look at what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 7:25: "Now about virgins: I have no command from the Lord, but I do give an opinion as one who by the Lord's mercy is faithful." Paul started this verse with the phrase "now about." This phrase comes from two Greek words, and they're the same two Greek words that we saw at the beginning of verse 1. In verse 1 Paul started by saying, "Now in response to the matters you wrote about." That phrase is a more expanded version of what we have here in verse 25. But in both places Paul started with two Greek words that mean "now about."

So in verse 1 Paul started responding to the letter from the Corinthian believers, and in verse 25 he added a second response to their letter. But later in this letter he gave additional responses. We're going to see a third response in chapter 8 and verse 1. Look at what Paul wrote here: "Now about food sacrificed to idols: We know that 'we all have knowledge.' Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up." So we see those same two words here at the beginning of the verse that we saw in chapter 7 and verse 25. Then there's a similar phrase in chapter 12 and verse 1. Look at what Paul wrote here: "Now concerning spiritual gifts: brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be unaware." Now this time the Christian Standard Bible has the phrase "now concerning" instead of the phrase "now about." But in the Greek text we have the same two words that we saw in the earlier passages.

So we've seen the beginning of Paul's first four responses to the letter from the Corinthian believers. But there are two more in chapter 16. In verse 1 he said, "Now about the collection for the saints: Do the same as I instructed the Galatian churches." Then in verse 12 Paul said, "Now about our brother Apollos: I strongly urged him to come to you with the brothers, but he was not at all willing to come now. However, he will come when he has an opportunity." So we're going to see a total of six responses that Paul gave to the letter from the Corinthian believers. Apparently their letter was pretty substantial, but it also had some significant flaws. And so Paul spent a considerable amount of time correcting their thinking in chapters 7–16. They needed to change their views in a variety of areas.

So in chapter 7 and verses 1–24 Paul's first response was focused on the topic of marriage. And then in verses 25–40 he switched to a different topic. He said, "Now about virgins." The Greek word for virgins is used 15 times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote seven of them. But six out of those seven are found in this letter, and all six of them appear right here in verses 25–40. So this Greek word for virgins is a key

term in this section. It represents Paul's main focus at the end of chapter 7. So it's important to understand what this word means. It basically refers to people who have never had sexual intercourse. So Paul's main focus in verses 1–24 was on people who were married and had experienced sexual intimacy. But in verses 25–40 his main focus was on people who were single and had never experienced sexual intimacy.

Now Paul did briefly mention a different group of single people earlier in this chapter. In verses 8–9 he addressed widows and widowers. These people used to be married, but then their spouses died. So widows and widowers are single people who have experienced sexual intimacy. But now that they're single again, sexual intimacy is off limits. And Paul encouraged them to consider remaining single in verse 8. But in verse 9 he commanded them to get married if they struggled with the self-control needed to remain sexually pure. He said that it was better to marry than to burn with desire. And I think his comments here have application for all single people, even though he was directing them specifically to widows and widowers.

But in verses 25–40 Paul was primarily focused on virgins or single people who have never experienced sexual intimacy. But was Paul talking about both men and women here, or was he thinking about a specific gender? The Greek word for virgins can refer to people of either gender. In Revelation 14:4 it's used to refer to a special group of 144,000 people who remained virgins and did not defile themselves with women. So clearly the word refers to men there. But there is no clear example anywhere else in the New Testament where this word refers to men. Instead it refers consistently to women. In Luke 1:27 it refers to "a virgin engaged to a man named Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary." In Matthew 1:23 this word also refers to the mother of Jesus. In Acts 21:9 it refers Philip's "four virgin daughters who prophesied."

But of course what really matters for us is how Paul used the Greek word for virgin in 1 Corinthians 7. And it's clear later in the chapter that he was referring only to women. In verse 28 he said, "If you do get married, you have not sinned, and if a virgin gets married, she has not sinned." So Paul was addressing unmarried men in this verse, and then he talked about unmarried women using the word "virgin." Then in verse 36 Paul talked about a man who thought that he was acting inappropriately toward his virgin. It's hard to know for sure whether Paul was talking about the woman's father or her fiancé in that verse. We'll talk more about that issue when we get to that verse. But either way the word "virgin" clearly refers to a woman there.

So when Paul used the Greek word for virgins in verse 25, I believe that he was talking only about female virgins. And that view fits well with the historical context. Paul was writing to a church in a large Greek city in the Roman Empire. Now if he had been writing only to Jewish Christians, then it would have made sense for him to refer to both male and female virgins. After all, the Jews believed that all sex outside of marriage was sin based on the Old Testament. But in Greek and Roman societies there was no expectation that a single man would have been a virgin. Now single women were expected to remain virgins until they got married, and they usually got married at a young age anyway. But single men normally didn't get married until they were older, and most of them would have indulged in sex with prostitutes on a regular basis. This is why Paul had to teach so strongly against that practice at the end of chapter 6.

So in chapter 7 and verse 25 Paul began responding to what the Corinthian believers wrote about female virgins in their letter to him. And he started by setting the table for them. Everyone knows that you're supposed to set the table before you eat. Most of my kids have learned that principle by experience. Once they're old enough to carry dishes, they're old enough to set the table in our house. That's one of the jobs they have when they're younger. And if they're lazy and don't do their job when they're supposed to, then the meal gets delayed, and we have to wait longer to eat. Now Paul didn't make the Corinthian believers wait too long to start eating in verses 25–40. He started to give them instructions about virgins in verse 26. But first he wanted to set the table in verse 25 and prepare them for what he was about to teach them. And the first thing Paul said when he set the table was that he had no command from the Lord.

The Greek word for command is used seven times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote all of them. He used it twice in this letter, and we already saw the first one back in verse 6 of this chapter. There he said, "I say this as a concession, not as a command." So in the previous verse he was just telling them what they could do and not what they had to do. And Paul said something similar in 2 Corinthians 8. In verse 8 he said, "I am not saying this as a command." In that passage he was teaching the Corinthian believers about the importance of giving to the Lord's work. But he didn't want to command them to give. He wanted them to give willingly without being coerced. So he tried to motivate them by appealing to what some other churches were doing. He basically gave them an example instead of a command.

So in those two passages Paul used the Greek word for command to talk about his commands or really his lack of commands. But in other passages Paul used this word to refer to commands from someone else. In 1 Timothy 1:1 he said that he was "an apostle of Christ Jesus by the command of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus our hope." So in that verse Paul was referring to God's command for him to become an apostle. Now listen to what Paul said in Titus 1:3: "In his own time he has revealed his word in the preaching with which I was entrusted by the command of God our Savior." So in that verse Paul was talking about God's command for Paul to preach his word. In Romans 16:26 Paul referred to "the command of the eternal God" when he talked about the revelation made known through the prophetic Scriptures.

So in all three of those verses Paul used the Greek word for command to refer to God's commands. And that's exactly what Paul was doing in 1 Corinthians 7:25 as well. But in this verse Paul did not mention any specific commands from God. Instead he said that he did not have a command from the Lord about virgins. The Greek word for Lord is a title that's used over 700 times in the New Testament. We've already seen it 28 times in this letter, and in most of those cases it's clearly referring to Jesus. For example, in chapter 1 and verse 3 Paul greeted the Corinthian believers with these words: "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

But even when the word "Lord" is used by itself in 1 Corinthians, we've seen that it normally refers to Jesus. In chapter 2 and verse 8 Paul said, "None of the rulers of this age knew this wisdom, because if they had known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory." That verse is clearly referring to the crucifixion of Jesus. In chapter 6 and verse 14 Paul said, "God raised up the Lord and will also raise us up by his power." That verse is clearly referring to the resurrection of Jesus. So I think it's pretty obvious that Paul was referring to Jesus when he used the word "Lord" in chapter 7. First in verse 10 Paul gave a re-

minder about some commands from the Lord, and he was referring to the earthly teaching of Jesus on divorce. Then in verse 12 Paul gave some commands that did not come from the Lord. In other words, Jesus did not give any specific teaching about a believer getting divorced from an unbeliever.

And here in verse 25 Paul said that he also did not have a command from the Lord Jesus about virgins. The Greek word for Lord is pronounced “kurios,” and it usually just means “master.” It normally stresses the idea of authority, and so it shows here that Jesus is in charge and that we must submit to him. Now some Christians think that we don’t need to trust in Jesus as our Lord to be saved. We just need to trust in him as our Savior, and then maybe down the road we can submit ourselves to him as our Lord. But that’s not what Scripture teaches. Acts 16:31 tells us that we must believe in the Lord Jesus to be saved. Romans 10:13 says that “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” So we can’t receive Jesus as our Savior without also recognizing him as our Lord. We can’t be saved without submitting to his lordship over our lives.

But Jesus is not a cruel and demanding master. In Matthew 11:30 he said that his yoke is easy and his burden is light. And so there are areas of our lives in which Jesus didn’t give any commands. What this means is that he was giving us freedom in those areas. We can do what we want as long as we have the right motives. But sometimes Jesus didn’t address certain areas because he wanted his apostles to address them later. And that’s what we have in 1 Corinthians 7. In verse 25 Paul said that he had no command from the Lord about virgins. But then he gave another statement at the end of the verse. He said, “But I do give an opinion as one who by the Lord’s mercy is faithful.” Paul started this statement with the word “but” to show that he was making a contrast with the previous statement. He did not have any commands from Jesus about virgins, but he did want to give them an opinion about virgins.

The Greek word for opinion is used nine times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote five of them. He used it three times in this letter, and we’ve already seen the first one back in chapter 1 and verse 10. In that verse Paul said that he wanted the Corinthian believers to “be united with the same understanding and the same conviction.” The Greek word for conviction there is the same one that Paul used in chapter 7 and verse 25. Now when we studied chapter 1 and verse 10, I concluded that Paul was not talking about our convictions there. A conviction is a firmly held opinion, and I really doubt that Paul wanted or expected the Corinthian believers to have the same opinions about everything. But our Greek word can also have the idea of purpose, and that nuance makes more sense in that verse. Paul certainly wanted all believers to have the same purpose in life. We should all be focused on glorifying God and pleasing him.

But in chapter 7 and verse 25 it makes sense that Paul was talking about his conviction. He had a strong opinion about virgins, and he wanted to share that opinion with the Corinthian believers at the end of chapter 7. Now he easily could have said that he was going to give them some commands about virgins. He could have used the same Greek word for command that we saw earlier in the verse. But he switched to a different word because he wanted to give opinions instead of commands. However, we need to remember that Paul was writing as an apostle. In other words, he was an official representative of Jesus and carried his authority. The letters of Paul are inspired by God, and so even though he was just giving his opinions here, they’re inspired opinions that we need to consider very carefully.

And at the end of verse 25 Paul focused more attention on why we should give careful consideration to his opinions about virgins. He described himself “as one who by the Lord’s mercy is faithful.” So Paul boldly asserted under divine inspiration that he was faithful. The Greek word for faithful is used 67 times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote 33 or almost half of them. Five of those occurrences are found in our letter, and we’ve already seen three of them. In chapter 1 and verse 9 Paul said very simply and yet powerfully that “God is faithful.” He made the same statement later in chapter 10 and verse 13 of this letter. So it’s obvious that Paul found great comfort in God’s faithfulness. The point is that God is reliable and trustworthy; he always keeps his promises.

Now we know that with many of God’s attributes, we’re supposed to follow his example. We need to be holy like he is holy, and we need to walk in love as Jesus loved us. So it’s not a surprise that we need to follow God’s example of faithfulness as well. True Christians are marked by being faithful to God. And Paul took that responsibility very seriously in his own life. In chapter 4 and verse 1 Paul said that he was a servant of Christ and a manager of the mysteries of God. And then in verse 2 he wrote, “In this regard, it is required that managers be found faithful.” He knew how important it was to serve God faithfully. And he made sure that he surrounded himself with other believers who took that responsibility seriously as well. In chapter 4 and verse 17 he said that he sent Timothy to the Corinthian believers, and he called Timothy “my dearly loved and faithful child in the Lord.”

So Paul and Timothy are excellent examples of how to be faithful to God. They weren’t perfect of course, and we can see their imperfections clearly as we study the New Testament. But their lives show us a pattern of consistent faithfulness to God in every area of their lives. And we need to follow their example, even when life gets difficult. Paul certainly faced a lot of persecution during his life. But we should all expect to face persecution as Christians. The believers in the church of Smyrna certainly faced that reality. Listen to what Jesus told them in Revelation 2:10: “Don’t be afraid of what you are about to suffer. Look, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison to test you, and you will experience affliction for ten days. Be faithful to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.” If we remain faithful to God to the end of our lives, one day we’ll hear the words of Jesus in Matthew 25:21: “Well done, good and faithful servant.”

But how do we live a life of faithfulness during difficult times like Paul did? Well, in 1 Corinthians 7:25 he gave the answer to that question. He described himself “as one who by the Lord’s mercy is faithful.” You see, Paul couldn’t be faithful to God by his own strength. He could only be faithful to God because Jesus showed mercy to him and enabled him to be faithful. The Greek word for mercy just means “to show compassion to someone in need.” This word is used 29 times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote 12 of them. Now this is the only place where he used it in this letter. But he did use it twice in 1 Timothy 1. In verse 13 he said that he received mercy from the Lord even though he was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an arrogant man. Then in verse 16 he said that he received mercy so that Jesus could demonstrate his patience.

So Paul knew that he didn’t deserve to be saved from the punishment of his sins. He was only saved because God showed compassion on him. And he knew that his ministry as an apostle was also due to

God's mercy. Listen to what he said in 2 Corinthians 4:1: "Therefore, since we have this ministry because we were shown mercy, we do not give up." So Paul knew that his salvation and his service to the Lord were dependent on God's mercy. And what was true for Paul is still true for us today as well. We need to thank God regularly for showing us compassion when he saved us. And we need to cry out to God and ask him to continue showing compassion to us as we serve him. As Jesus said in John 15:5, we can do nothing without him. Let's close in prayer.