

# 1 CORINTHIANS 7:27

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Turn in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 7. In this chapter Paul started responding to a letter from the Corinthian believers. In verse 1 he 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. The first one that he focused on was the theme of marriage in verses 1–24. Then in verses 25–40 he addressed a second theme. In the beginning of verse 25 he said, “Now about virgins.” So Paul started this chapter by focusing on people who had experienced sexual intimacy. But then he ended the chapter by talking about people who had never experienced sexual intimacy. These people were not married but single. And more specifically Paul was talking about female virgins in this passage. That’s how the Greek word for virgins is normally used in the New Testament.

So in verse 25 Paul said that he had no command from the Lord about virgins. And what Paul meant here was that Jesus never taught specifically about virgins during his earthly ministry. He didn’t give any commands about virgins that Paul could point the Corinthian believers to. But Paul was an apostle, and so he was an official representative of Jesus and carried his authority. And he wasn’t limited to simply quoting commands from Jesus. He wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and gave new revelation that came directly from God. So he was qualified to give the Corinthian believers some authoritative teaching about virgins.

But Paul did not say that he was giving the Corinthian believers a command about virgins at the end of chapter 7. So he was not talking about what we have to do. Instead he said that he was giving them an opinion. But this opinion was inspired by God, and so we need to consider it very carefully. And at the end of verse 25 Paul focused on why we should give careful consideration to his opinion about virgins. He described himself “as one who by the Lord’s mercy is faithful.” So Paul was a reliable servant of the Lord who could be trusted. He was not going to lead the Corinthian believers astray and give them poor advice. But he couldn’t be faithful to the Lord in his own strength. He could only be faithful because Jesus showed mercy to him and enabled him to be faithful.

Then in verse 26 Paul began to give his inspired opinion about virgins. He said, “Because of the present distress, I think that it is good for a man to remain as he is.” So in this verse Paul was applying the general rule that he gave us three times in verses 17–24. He said that we should remain in the state that we were in when we got saved. He already applied this rule to mixed marriages. A believer who is married to an unbeliever should stay married unless the unbeliever wants to get divorced. But here he was saying that a man should consider remaining single instead of getting married to a virgin. He didn’t give a command

to remain single, but he did say that it was a good option to consider. So it wasn't required, but it was beneficial. And he said that he held this opinion "because of the present distress."

Now there's a lot of debate among Bible scholars about what Paul meant by the phrase "present distress." And the most popular view is that he was talking about the future time of tribulation that God will bring on the earth just before Jesus returns. After all, that's how the Greek word for distress is used in Luke 21. In verse 23 Jesus said, "Woe to pregnant women and nursing mothers in those days, for there will be great distress in the land and wrath against this people." But there is also support for this view in the immediate context of 1 Corinthians 7:26. Just a little later in verses 29–31 Paul seemed to be referring to the end times. So it makes sense that he would be talking about the same topic here in verse 26.

But there are some problems with this view that are difficult to overcome. The first and biggest one is that Paul used the word "present" in verse 26. So he was not talking about something that would happen in the future. He was talking about something that was already happening when he wrote this letter. And so if Paul was talking about the tribulation in this verse, then he was saying that he was living in it! In other words, the time of tribulation had already started. But in that case Paul was wrong, because we're still here almost 2,000 years later! Jesus has not returned yet, and so clearly the time of tribulation did not take place during Paul's lifetime.

Another reason to reject this view is that Paul never used the Greek word for distress anywhere else to refer to the future time of tribulation on the earth. He certainly talked about the tribulation in several places like 1 and 2 Thessalonians, but he never referred to it using this Greek word for distress. Instead he used other words to describe the tribulation. But how should we respond to the strong contextual argument for the view that Paul was talking about the tribulation in 1 Corinthians 7:26? The answer is simply that Paul started a new paragraph in verse 29, and it's even marked by the phrase "brothers and sisters," which he often used at the beginning of a new paragraph. So most likely Paul was moving on to a different subject in that paragraph. He was talking about something different from what he was referring to in verse 26.

But we're still left with the question about what exactly Paul was talking about when he referred to the present distress. We can't be certain, but I think a strong case can be made that he was talking about a severe famine. There's plenty of extrabiblical evidence to support the idea that there were major grain shortages in the Roman Empire just before the time that Paul wrote this letter. And this view is also supported by Scripture. In Acts 11:28 Agabus "predicted by the Spirit that there would be a severe famine throughout the Roman world." So it makes a lot of sense that Paul was talking about this severe famine in 1 Corinthians 7:26. Now we can't know for sure because Paul didn't clearly state what he was referring to. But certainly the Corinthian believers would have understood what Paul was talking about, because they were living in it!

So when Paul encouraged the single men in the Corinthian church to consider remaining unmarried, he was basing his advice on this present distress, whether it was a severe famine or some other hardship that they were experiencing. And what this means is that his opinion was based on this difficult situation.

That's why we don't see him encouraging people to remain single this strongly in any of his other letters. But even in this passage there is no command to remain single, and Paul made it clear that it was not a sin to get married, even in this difficult situation. So Paul maintained a proper balance in his teaching on singleness and marriage here. Both of them are good gifts from God that we should appreciate. We can serve the Lord faithfully in either situation.

Now let's move on to 1 Corinthians 7:27. We're ready to cover some new material. Look at what Paul wrote in this verse: "Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be released. Are you released from a wife? Do not seek a wife." So in this verse Paul took the general opinion about virgins that he gave in verse 26, and he applied it more specifically to two different situations. And each of those situations is introduced with a question, which is followed by a response to the question. So let's start with the first question: "Are you bound to a wife?" The Greek word for bound is used 43 times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote five of them. Now usually this word just refers to being confined by restraints. For example, in Acts 21:33 when Paul was in Jerusalem, we read that "the commander approached, took him into custody, and ordered him to be bound with chains."

But this Greek word can also refer to being constrained by law and duty. That's how Paul used it in the only other place where it occurs in 1 Corinthians. In chapter 7 and verse 39 Paul said that "a wife is bound as long as her husband is living." Paul said something very similar when he used this word in Romans 7:2. He said that "a married woman is legally bound to her husband while he lives." So in both of these verses Paul was talking about being bound in marriage. And it seems like Paul was saying the same thing in 1 Corinthians 7:27, because he was talking about being bound to a wife. In other words, he was referring to someone who was already married.

So what did Paul say to the Corinthian believers who answered this question in the affirmative? If they could say "yes" to this question, then his response applied to them. He said, "Do not seek to be released." The Greek verb for seek is very common in the New Testament. Sometimes it refers to the action of trying to find something. For example, in Luke 15:8 it describes a woman in a story of Jesus who lost a coin and searched carefully until she found it. But sometimes this word just refers to striving for a goal, and that seems to be the meaning here in 1 Corinthians 7:27. But in this verse Paul was talking about not striving for a goal. He seemed to be saying that he didn't want married people to try to get released from their marriage. The Greek word for released is actually a noun and not a verb. It's used only here in the New Testament, and it just refers to a release or a separation. So Paul seemed to be telling married people not to seek a divorce.

Now let's move on to the second question in this verse: "Are you released from a wife?" This time the Greek word for released is actually a verb. But this verb comes from the same root as the noun that we just saw earlier in the verse. So these two words are clearly referring to the same concept. Now sometimes this verb is talking about being released from prison. But here it apparently refers to being released from marriage. It seems to be talking about someone who used to have a wife but doesn't anymore. The Greek word for wife here is the same word that we saw in the first question. So Paul seemed to be referring to men who were divorced.

So what did Paul say to the Corinthian believers who answered this question in the affirmative? If they could say “yes” to this question, then his response applied to them. He said, “Do not seek a wife.” Paul used the same Greek word for seek that we saw earlier in the verse. Once again he was talking about striving for a goal or in this case not striving for a goal. He did not want these people to strive for the goal of getting a wife. The Greek word for wife is the same one that we’ve already seen twice in this verse. So we’ve seen four verbs in this verse, and all of them are second person singular. The point here is that Paul was addressing his readers individually and not as a group. It was as though he was talking personally with each of them as he asked these questions and gave his responses.

So we’ve finished walking through this verse, and it seems to be pretty straightforward on the surface. Paul seemed to be talking first of all to married people and then to divorced people. He apparently told married people not to get divorced and then divorced people not to get married. And this approach to the verse was popular for many years. But more recently the majority of Bible commentators have rejected this view for a variety of reasons. The first one is that it doesn’t fit the context. Paul clearly said in verse 25 that he was talking about virgins in this section. So it makes no sense that he would immediately start addressing married and divorced men just two verses later.

Another reason for rejecting this view is that Paul was dealing with issues here that weren’t mentioned by Jesus during his earthly ministry. That’s clearly what Paul said in verse 25 at the beginning of this section. But Paul already dealt with the issue of divorce back in verses 10–11 of this chapter. And he said in verse 10 that he was repeating a command given by Jesus. So why would he say that he had a command from Jesus about divorce in verses 10–11 and then say in verses 25–27 that he didn’t have a command from Jesus about divorce? Plus Paul went on to say in verse 28 that the one who gets married has not sinned. But if he was talking about divorced men, then he contradicted what he said earlier in verses 10–11 when he told divorced people not to remarry. Now I believe that there’s an understood exception to that rule, but in verse 28 Paul was giving blanket permission for people to get married. So I don’t see how he could have been talking about divorced people in verses 27–28.

But there’s another problem with the traditional view of verse 27. The Greek terms translated with the word “released” are not used anywhere in Scripture to refer to the concept of divorce. Now the Greek noun is used only here in the New Testament, but the Greek verb is used 42 times, and it never refers to divorce in any of the other 41 occurrences. In fact, as far as I can tell these two words aren’t even used outside the New Testament to refer to divorce. The Greeks had other words that they used for divorce, and we saw two of them back in verses 10–11. One of them is translated “leave,” and the other one is translated “divorce.” If Paul wanted to talk about divorce again in verse 27, I think he would have used one or both of those terms.

So if Paul wasn’t addressing married and divorced men in verse 27, then whom was he talking to? The standard approach that most recent commentators take with this verse is that Paul was talking to men who were betrothed and men who were not betrothed. The word “betrothed” is just a fancy word that refers to people who are engaged to be married. But engagement in the ancient world was not viewed in the same way as engagement in modern times. That’s why Bible scholars tend to use the word “be-

trothed” to refer to engagement during biblical times. They just want to maintain a distinction between the two types of engagement.

So what was different about engagement during ancient times? The main difference was that the betrothed were viewed as though they were already married. They had the status of marriage without the privileges of marriage. But if they wanted to terminate the engagement, they needed to get a divorce. And we have a really good example of this practice in Scripture. Look at Matthew 1:18–19: “The birth of Jesus Christ came about this way: After his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, it was discovered before they came together that she was pregnant from the Holy Spirit. So her husband Joseph, being a righteous man, and not wanting to disgrace her publicly, decided to divorce her secretly.”

So in verse 18 we’re told that Mary was engaged to Joseph. The English Standard Version, the Legacy Standard Bible, the New American Standard Bible say that she was betrothed to Joseph. The New International Version says that she was pledged to be married to Joseph. So it’s very clear that Mary and Joseph were not married at this point. But then verse 19 refers to Joseph as Mary’s husband. And it says that when he found out she was pregnant, he decided to divorce her. The Greek word here for divorce is not one of the two words that Paul used for divorce in 1 Corinthians 7:10–11. But it clearly refers to divorce in other passages like Matthew 5, Matthew 19, Mark 10, and Luke 16. So in Matthew 1:19 Joseph clearly needed to get divorced from Mary if he wanted to terminate their engagement.

Now of course we know that Joseph didn’t go through with the divorce. Verse 20 says that “an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, ‘Joseph, son of David, don’t be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because what has been conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.’” Then in verses 24–25 Matthew told us that “when Joseph woke up, he did as the Lord’s angel had commanded him. He married her but did not have sexual relations with her until she gave birth to a son. And he named him Jesus.” So it’s clear here that Joseph didn’t get married to Mary until after the angel appeared to him. And the angel didn’t appear to him until after he decided to get divorced from her. So it’s obvious that he had to get divorced from her if he wanted to end their engagement. The bond of engagement was viewed to be just as strong as the bond of marriage.

So at first glance it may seem like Paul was talking about marriage in 1 Corinthians 7:27. But that’s because we’re reading it through our modern glasses. We have a strong distinction between marriage and engagement that didn’t exist during biblical times. We don’t treat engagement as seriously as people did back in those days. But for them being engaged was basically the same as being married. So when Paul talked about being bound to a wife in verse 27, he very easily could have been talking about being betrothed instead of married. The Greek word for wife in this verse can just refer to women in general. For example, in John 2:4 and John 19:26 Jesus used this word to refer to his mother. Most Bible scholars believe that Mary was no longer married and was a widow at this point.

So in 1 Corinthians 7:27 the Greek word for bound can certainly refer to being married, but it can also refer to being engaged. Now I already mentioned that the Greek words for released in this verse aren’t used to refer to divorce anywhere else. And this fact is a problem for both approaches to this verse, be-

cause divorce was required to terminate an engagement. So I think we have to conclude that Paul was talking about divorce here. But I think he chose to use a new word here to indicate that he was talking about a different kind of divorce compared to what he mentioned in verses 10–11. In those verses he was talking about ending a marriage, but in verse 27 he was talking about ending an engagement.

So this approach to verse 27 makes a lot of sense. It certainly fits much better into the context. Paul clearly said in verse 25 he was starting to talk about virgins, and the subject of engagement fits perfectly here. This way all three references to women in verse 27 are pointing to virgins, whether they were engaged or not. Now I'm not saying that widows and divorced women can't get engaged. Widows can certainly get remarried, and some divorced women can as well. And if they get remarried, then they're going to get engaged first! But in this passage Paul was only talking about women who had never been married. And the vast majority of them would have been virgins.

Now there are a few challenges with this approach to verse 27. The first one is that Paul used perfect tense verbs in the two questions that he asked. And normally perfect tense verbs in Greek refer to a completed action in the past with ongoing results in the present. Now that's not a problem with the Greek verb for bound. Whether Paul was talking about marriage or engagement, there was clearly a past event that initiated this status. But the Greek verb for released is more difficult to interpret. It doesn't really make sense that Paul was talking only to men who were divorced, whether they terminated their marriage or their engagement. Most commentators today believe that he was simply talking about men who were not engaged at that time. It's hard to imagine why Paul would have wanted to address only the men who used to be engaged at the end of the verse.

But normally the Greek perfect tense verb does refer to a past action. And for those men who had never been engaged, there was no past action for them. There was no point in time when they got released from their engagement. So most Bible scholars think that Paul was using the perfect tense in a more unusual way here. They believe that he was just referring to the present status of being free from marriage. In fact, many Bible scholars now think that the Greek perfect tense normally just refers to the present and not the past. They believe that a current status is usually in view. I'm not inclined to see this nuance as the normal meaning for the perfect tense, but I'm willing to accept that it's used from time to time. And it does seem to be the meaning here in 1 Corinthians 7:27.

But there's one more problem that we need to tackle in this verse. Did you notice that Paul used commands here? He said to the men who were betrothed, "Do not seek to be released." And he said to the men who were not betrothed, "Do not seek a wife." Now maybe the first command can be taken at face value. After all, breaking an engagement during ancient times required divorce, and we know that God does not permit divorce, at least in general. So is it wrong for people to get engaged and then to terminate their engagement? That's a tricky issue, and I'm not going to try to deal with it today. But later in the passage Paul returned to this subject, and so we'll talk about it then. It's certainly an important issue that we should not ignore.

But what about the second command in verse 27? Why did Paul command the men who were not be-

trothed that they were not to seek a wife? The best view here is that this command must be understood in light of the context. Normally when Paul gave commands, he expected his readers to obey. And if they disobeyed his commands, they were disobeying the Lord. But this command is different. In verse 25 Paul said that he was just giving his opinion. And in verse 26 he said that it's good for a man to remain as he is; he didn't give a command about it. Then in verse 28 he clarified that if a man who is not betrothed gets married, he has not sinned. We'll cover this verse in more detail next week, but it's pretty obvious what Paul was communicating here. He was basically saying that his command at the end of verse 27 is not a normal command, because we can disobey it without sinning. So it should be understood simply as strongly-worded advice.

But we need to remember that Paul was giving inspired advice in this passage. He was speaking as a trustworthy servant of the Lord. We should not dismiss his words in verse 27 simply because he was giving his opinion. We need to consider his advice carefully, and those who are single and have never been married need to be open to the possibility of remaining single. After all, there are a lot of benefits to remaining single. We'll be talking about them as we cover the rest of this chapter. But Paul was very careful here to tell us that those who have never been married can certainly get married if they choose to do so. They just shouldn't rush into it without considering the possibility of remaining single. Both of these statuses are gifts from God that we should appreciate. Let's close in prayer and thank God for the gifts of singleness and marriage.