

# 1 CORINTHIANS 7:28

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Turn in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 7. In verses 1–24 we saw that Paul was focused on the theme of marriage. And now in verses 25–40 we’re seeing that he was focused on the topic of virgins. So he started the chapter by talking about people who had experienced sexual intimacy. And then he ended the chapter by talking about people who had never experienced sexual intimacy. And more specifically he was focused on 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. In other words, Jesus never taught specifically about virgins during his earthly ministry. But Paul wanted to give us his opinion about this issue. He wasn’t giving any commands, but he was writing under divine inspiration as someone who was faithful by the Lord’s mercy.

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 many Bible scholars think that Paul was talking about the future time of tribulation that God will bring on the earth just before Jesus returns. But Paul never used the Greek word for distress anywhere else to refer to this tribulation period. And he used the word “present,” which means that he was talking about something that was already happening when he wrote this letter. So I think it’s more likely that Paul 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. In Acts 11:28 Agabus even “predicted by the Spirit that there would be a severe famine throughout the Roman world.” Now we can’t be sure that Paul was talking about a severe famine in 1 Corinthians 7:26, but it certainly makes a lot of sense.

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.

Then in verse 27 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. Paul wrote, “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 the first half of the verse it sounds like Paul was talking to men who were already married. And apparently he was telling them not to get divorced. Then in the second half of the verse it sounds like he was talking to men who were divorced. And apparently he told them not to get married.

Now 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. One of them 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 already said he was dealing with issues here that weren’t addressed by Jesus during his earthly ministry. 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 it makes no sense that Paul would return to this issue of divorce in verses 25–27 and say that he didn’t have a command from Jesus about it. That would be a contradiction.

So the standard approach that most recent commentators take with verse 27 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 during ancient times engagement was significantly different from our modern engagement. During biblical times the betrothed were viewed as though they were already married. They had the status of marriage without the privileges of marriage. So if they wanted to terminate the engagement, they needed to get a divorce. That’s why Matthew 1 tells us that Joseph decided to get divorced from Mary when he found out that she was pregnant. They were only engaged at that point and were not married, but he had to get divorced from her in order to terminate their engagement.

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. And this approach makes a lot of sense in the context, because the subject of engagement fits perfectly with the theme of virgins. So in this verse I believe that Paul was talking only about single women who had never been married. Some of them were engaged and the others were not, but either way they were still virgins.

Now there are some challenges with taking this approach to verse 27. And the biggest one is 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. But why would Paul have commanded the men who were not betrothed 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. 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.

So it seems pretty clear that Paul was not giving a normal command at the end of verse 27. Instead he was just giving strongly-worded advice. And we can confirm this interpretation by looking at the next verse. So let’s move on to 1 Corinthians 7:28. We’re ready to cover some new material. Look at what Paul wrote in this verse: “However, if you do get married, you have not sinned, and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned. But such people will have trouble in this life, and I am trying to spare you.” Paul started this verse with the word “however,” which introduces a contrast with the previous verse. So at the end of verse 27 it seems like Paul commanded non-engaged men not to seek a wife. But then he presented some clarification in the beginning of verse 28. He said, “If you do get married, you have not sinned.”

So Paul used a conditional statement here. A conditional statement has two parts: one that starts with the word “if,” and one that starts with the word “then.” And usually they come in that order, but often the word “then” is not used, and that’s the case here. However, this word is still implied even when it’s not there. Now the way a conditional statement works is that there’s a condition that must be met for something to happen or be true. The part of the statement that starts with the word “if” is where the condition is given. And the other part of the statement is where we see what will happen if the condition is met. So in the beginning of verse 28 the condition is getting married.

The Greek word for married just refers to a man and a woman becoming husband and wife. It’s a verb that’s used 28 times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote 12 of them. He used it three times in 1 Timothy, but the other nine occurrences are in 1 Corinthians. And all of them are found right here in chapter 7. The first two are in verse 9, and the third one is in verse 10. Now we’re seeing the fourth one here in verse 28. But this is the first time in the chapter that Paul used this Greek verb in the second person. He didn’t say, “If they get married.” He said, “If you get married.” And the verb isn’t second person plural. It’s second person singular, just like all the verbs in verse 27. So Paul was addressing his readers individually and not as a group. It was as though he was talking personally with each of them.

But was Paul actually addressing all of his readers or just some of them? Well, if we look back at verse 27, we can see that he was talking to just the men. And he was only referring to men who were single, whether they were betrothed or not. So most likely he was still referring to those single men in the beginning of verse 28 as well. And more specifically he was probably talking to the single men who were not betrothed. He had apparently just commanded not to seek a wife at the end of verse 27. But we’ve already concluded from the previous context that he was just giving them strongly-worded advice. And

now we can see confirmation of that conclusion in verse 28 as well. Paul told single non-engaged men, “If you do get married, you have not sinned.”

The Greek word for sinned is a verb that’s used 42 times in the New Testament. Paul wrote 17 of them, and seven of them appear in this letter. We already saw the first one back in chapter 6 and verse 18, where Paul said that “the person who is sexually immoral sins against his own body.” This Greek word basically means “to miss the mark,” and in the New Testament it always refers to doing something wrong in God’s sight. In 1 John 3:4 we have a simple and clear definition of what sin is; there John said that “everyone who commits sin practices lawlessness; and sin is lawlessness.” So when we sin, we’re breaking God’s law and disobeying him.

But in 1 Corinthians 7:28 Paul said that a single non-engaged man has not sinned if he gets married. So there’s nothing wrong with disobeying Paul’s command at the end of verse 27. Normally if we disobey one of Paul’s commands, we’re disobeying the Lord. In chapter 14 and verse 37 Paul said, “If anyone thinks he is a prophet or spiritual, he should recognize that what I write to you is the Lord’s command.” So in general Paul’s commands carried the same authority as the commands of Jesus. That’s because Paul was an apostle or an official representative of Jesus. And of course Paul wasn’t the only apostle who could give commands with the authority of Jesus. In 2 Peter 3:2 the apostle Peter referred to “the command of our Lord and Savior given through your apostles.” So any apostle of Jesus could give fully authoritative commands to Christians.

But in 1 Corinthians 7:27 Paul chose to give commands that were not authoritative, and he made that fact abundantly clear in verse 28. In fact, he didn’t just tell the single men that they could get married without sinning. He went on to make a similar statement about virgins. In the middle of verse 28 he said, “And if a virgin marries, she has not sinned.” The Greek word for virgin is the same one that we just saw in verse 25. It’s 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. This word just refers to people who have never had sexual intercourse. And it’s obvious here in verse 28 that Paul was using it to refer only to female virgins. He already addressed the men in the beginning of the verse, and here in the middle of the verse he switched his focus to the women and said the same thing to them.

Now this isn’t the first time that Paul used this approach in chapter 7. Look back at what he said in verse 2: “But because sexual immorality is so common, each man should have sexual relations with his own wife, and each woman should have sexual relations with her own husband.” So Paul gave some instructions to husbands, and then he gave the same instructions to wives. Now look at what he said in verses 3–4: “A husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise a wife to her husband. A wife does not have the right over her own body, but her husband does. In the same way, a husband does not have the right over his own body, but his wife does.” So in verse 3 Paul once again gave instructions to husbands and then gave the same instructions to wives. But in verse 4 he switched the order. He started with wives and then addressed husbands. But he said the same thing to both of them.

Now look at what Paul said in verses 12–13: “But I (not the Lord) say to the rest: If any brother has an

unbelieving wife and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. Also, if any woman has an unbelieving husband and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce her husband.” So in verse 12 Paul told believing husbands not to divorce their unbelieving wives. And then in verse 13 he turned things around. He told believing wives not to divorce their unbelieving husbands. And in verse 16 he gave the same reason to both of them. He said, “Wife, for all you know, you might save your husband. Husband, for all you know, you might save your wife.”

So over and over in this chapter we’ve seen that Paul was careful to stress that God has the same standards for both men and women in marriage. Now this doesn’t mean that husbands and wives have the same role. Men and women are equal and yet different. In Ephesians 5:22 Paul said that wives need to submit to their husbands, and in verse 23 he said that the husband is the head of the wife. So the husband is the leader of the home, but the wife has the privilege of carrying children in the womb and giving birth to them. This is one of the reasons that Paul said in Titus 2:4 that young wives are to be “workers at home,” and in 1 Timothy 5:14 he said that they’re to “manage their households.”

But God doesn’t have different standards of sexual purity for men and women. Both husbands and wives need to be faithful to their spouses. They have authority over each other’s bodies. And divorce was off limits for both of them except under very special circumstances. So unbelievers say that the Bible is anti-women, they’re just showing their ignorance. Most of them haven’t actually read the Bible. They’re just parrots repeating what they’ve heard other people say about the Bible. But they should really check it for themselves, and I think they’d be surprised at what they find. The simple fact of the matter is that wherever biblical Christianity has flourished, so have women.

So in 1 Corinthians 7:28 Paul said that men who have never gotten married can do so without sinning, and then he said the same thing about virgin women. He used the same Greek verb for sinned in the middle of the verse that he used at the beginning of the verse. But after Paul gave this clarification, he ended the verse by giving another contrast. He said, “But such people will have trouble in this life, and I am trying to spare you.” So Paul used the word “but” to switch back to his focus at the end of verse 27. He was advising his readers to remain single if they were not already engaged. And he was basically giving them a reason not to get married. He said that “such people will have trouble in this life.”

The phrase “such people” is just pointing back to what Paul said earlier in verse 28. He said that it was not a sin to get married, but then he made a comment about what life is like for married people. So the phrase “such people” is just a reference to married people. And Paul said that married people will have trouble in this life. The phrase “trouble in this life” is found not just in the Christian Standard Bible but also in the Legacy Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible. But this is not the most literal translation. The King James Version and the New King James Version are more literal here. They both have the phrase “trouble in the flesh.”

Now the Greek word for flesh is very common in the New Testament; it’s used well over a hundred times. And it can have different nuances. Sometimes it has the figurative meaning of being dominated by sin. That’s how Paul used the word in Galatians 5. In verses 16–17 he said, “I say then, walk by the Spirit and

you will certainly not carry out the desire of the flesh. For the flesh desires what is against the Spirit, and the Spirit desires what is against the flesh; these are opposed to each other, so that you don't do what you want." Then in verses 19–21 Paul gave a list of the works of the flesh, and he followed it with the fruit of the Spirit in verses 22–23. The point with this contrast is that the flesh and the Spirit are opposites. The flesh pulls us toward sin, and the Spirit steers us toward righteousness.

But usually the Greek word for flesh is used more literally in the New Testament. It often refers to the part of our body that covers our bones. For example, we sometimes see the phrase "flesh and blood" in Scripture. In Ephesians 6:12 Paul said that "our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against ... evil, spiritual forces." And in that phrase the word "flesh" clearly refers to the part of our body that covers our blood vessels. But the Greek word for flesh can also represent our bodies as a whole. In Colossians 2:5 Paul said, "For I may be absent in body, but I am with you in spirit." The Greek word for body there is the same one that we have in our passage. The King James Version and the New King James Version both have the word "flesh" instead of the word "body." But most Bible translations give us the word "body" because it's obvious that Paul wasn't talking only about part of his body. It wasn't just his flesh that was absent from the Colossian believers. He must have been talking about his whole body.

And I think this is the nuance that Paul intended in 1 Corinthians 7:28. He was clearly not talking about the figurative idea of being dominated by sin. And I don't think he was simply referring to the part of our body that covers our blood vessels. Instead he was talking about the body as a whole. He was referring to trouble that we experience in our body. So the Christian Standard Bible, the Legacy Standard Bible, and the New American Standard Bible are too broad here when they refer to "trouble in this life." That phrase can refer to all kinds of trouble, including both physical and spiritual trouble. But I don't see how Paul could have been talking about spiritual trouble here. He was talking about physical trouble.

The Greek word for trouble is used 45 times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote 24 of them, which is over half. But this is the only place where he used it in this letter. However, he did use it nine times in 2 Corinthians. In chapter 1 and verse 4 he said that God "comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any kind of affliction, through the comfort we ourselves receive from God." In this verse Paul used our Greek word twice, and it's translated with the word "affliction" each time. It usually just refers to some kind of physical pain or suffering. Paul certainly suffered a lot for Christ during his missionary journeys, but God comforted him during those times, and so he could turn around and comfort other believers during similar times.

But what kind of trouble or affliction was Paul talking about in 1 Corinthians 7:28? Well, I think it's fairly clear that he was just referring back to the present distress that he mentioned in verse 26. The Greek words for distress and trouble are very similar in meaning. So I believe that Paul was probably still talking about the severe famine that was causing problems throughout the Roman Empire. But how would a famine create more trouble for married people than for single people? After all, can't a husband and wife help each other through a famine? That's true, but during ancient times a marriage normally would have produced a good number of children. And the average husband and wife would have had a lot of difficulty providing food for themselves and their kids during a famine.

So Paul said at the end of verse 28 that he advised single people not to get married because of this physical trouble that they were experiencing at that time. He ended the verse by saying, “I am trying to spare you.” The Greek word for spare is used 10 times in the New Testament. Paul wrote seven of them, but it’s used only here in this letter. This word basically means “to help someone avoid loss or discomfort.” So Paul didn’t want single believers to suffer discomfort and difficulty needlessly. And he stressed his desire by using a first person pronoun here even though he didn’t need to. Greek verbs are already marked for person and number, and so we already know from looking at the verb that it’s first person singular. But Paul added the separate pronoun to emphasize his care for the single believers in Corinth.

But we need to make sure that we don’t overreact and try to avoid all physical discomfort. Paul certainly didn’t overreact in this area. In Romans 8:35 he said that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ, even affliction. So we don’t need to be afraid of affliction. Instead Paul said in Romans 5:3 that we should “rejoice in our afflictions, because we know that affliction produces endurance.” In Romans 12:12 Paul said that we need to be “patient in affliction.” So if we’re married, we’re probably going to experience additional physical hardship if we haven’t already. But God can use that difficulty for good in our lives. He will use our afflictions to help us grow in patience and endurance. Let’s close in prayer and ask for God to help all of us grow in those areas.