

1 CORINTHIANS 7:32–34A

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Turn in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 7. We've seen that Paul was focused on the theme of marriage in verses 1–24. But then in verses 25–40 he switched to the related topic of virgins, and more specifically he was talking about female virgins. Now he did not have a command from Jesus during his earthly ministry about virgins. But he wanted to give us his inspired opinion about this issue. So in verse 26 he said that it's good for a man to remain single because of the present distress. And most likely he was referring to a severe famine that took place in the Roman Empire around that time. But in verse 28 Paul made it clear that it was not a sin to get married. He just wanted to spare his single readers from needless hardship during that difficult time.

Then in verses 29–31 Paul gave another argument for his opinion that it's good for single people to remain unmarried. He said that the time is limited, and I think he just meant that once Jesus ascended to heaven, he could come back at any moment. And when Jesus returns to bring us home, that event will launch the end times. Next there will be a seven-year period of tribulation on the earth, and afterwards Jesus will return to set up his millennial kingdom. Then the earth will be destroyed after Satan's final rebellion. We're told in 2 Peter 3:7 that "the present heavens and earth are being stored up for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and the destruction of the ungodly."

So we know that one day this earth is going to pass away. And that's what Paul was talking about in 1 Corinthians 7:31. He said that "this world in its current form is passing away." And this fact has some ramifications for how we live right now during the church age. Paul laid out these ramifications in five parallel statements here in verses 29–31. But the most important one in this context is the first one, because it has to do with singleness and marriage. In verse 29 Paul said that "from now on those who have wives should be as though they had none." Now it sounds like Paul was saying that married men should live as though they aren't married. But obviously this doesn't mean that married men should get divorced or that they should abstain from sexual relations with their wives. Paul already dealt with those issues very clearly in the beginning of this chapter.

So I think it's safe to say that Paul was using hyperbole here. In other words, he was exaggerating to make a point. And his point is that we should not find our ultimate joy and satisfaction in marriage. After all, human marriage is temporary and ends at death. Then our temporary marriages will be replaced by our permanent marriage to Jesus. So we should find our ultimate joy and satisfaction in our relationship with the Lord. Nothing should matter more to us than pleasing him. There's nothing inherently wrong with getting married, but it's not something that single believers should become consumed with. Our marital

status is not central to our identity as Christians. Our highest priority should be on serving the Lord and living in obedience to him, whether we're single or married.

Now let's move on to 1 Corinthians 7:32. We're ready to cover some new material. And today we're actually going to get through not just one verse or two verses but a little more than two verses. Look at what Paul wrote starting in verse 32 through the beginning of verse 34: "I want you to be without concerns. The unmarried man is concerned about the things of the Lord—how he may please the Lord. But the married man is concerned about the things of the world—how he may please his wife—and his interests are divided." Now verse 32 actually begins with a conjunction in the original Greek. And this conjunction is flexible and can be translated in different ways. The Legacy Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible have the word "but." But Paul wasn't giving us a contrast with what he just wrote. Instead he was just adding another reason for single people to consider remaining unmarried. So I think the NET Bible is correct to start verse 32 with the word "and." We have a new paragraph here with an additional argument for singleness.

But once again we can see that Paul wasn't giving commands here. He just said, "I want you to be without concerns." He was giving his personal desire for the Corinthian believers, just like he did back in verse 7. He used the same Greek verb there when he said, "I wish that all people were as I am." He had a desire for single believers to remain unmarried at that time, but he did not give them a command about it. Instead he said in verse 32 that he wanted them to be without concerns. The phrase "without concerns" comes from one word in the original Greek. The root of this word means "concern," but it has a prefix attached to it that sounds like our letter A. And this prefix basically just means "not." For example, theism refers to the belief in a God, and atheism refers to the belief that there is no God.

So in this verse Paul was talking about not having any concern. Now this Greek word is used only one other time in the New Testament. It's found in Matthew 28, which records the story of Jesus' resurrection. When the Jewish religious leaders found out what happened, they decided to give a lot of money to the soldiers who watched over Jesus' tomb. In verse 13 they told the soldiers to say, "His disciples came during the night and stole him while we were sleeping." Then in verse 14 they said to the soldiers, "If this reaches the governor's ears, we will deal with him and keep you out of trouble." That phrase "out of trouble" comes from our Greek word. So the religious leaders were basically saying that the soldiers didn't need to be concerned about the governor.

And in 1 Corinthians 7:32 Paul was saying something similar. He told his readers that he wanted them to be without concerns. But this doesn't mean that it's wrong to have concerns. We need to remember that Paul was just giving his opinion and his personal desire here. In fact, Paul went on to clarify that he actually thought some concerns were good. In the rest of verse 32 he said that "the unmarried man is concerned about the things of the Lord—how he may please the Lord." The Greek word for concerned is a verb that comes from the same root as the word we just looked at. And we can see the connection between these two words in most English translations, including the Christian Standard Bible. First we have the phrase "without concerns," and then we have the word "concerned." So we have the same root here in English just like in Greek.

Now the Greek verb for concerned is used 19 times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote seven of them. But five of them are found in this letter, and four of them are right here in verses 32–34. We’re going to see this word once in verse 33 and twice in verse 34. But this word will appear again in chapter 12 when Paul teaches about spiritual gifts. In that chapter he said that the church is like a human body. As believers we are similar to the different parts of the body. And Paul was saying that the different parts of the body work together and need each other. So his point was that believers need each other as well. And in verse 25 his goal was “that there would be no division in the body, but that the members would have the same concern for each other.”

So Paul also used our Greek word positively in this verse. He wanted believers to be concerned about each other. In verse 26 he went on to say that “if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it.” So we should know what’s going on in each other’s lives, and we should empathize with each other. As Paul said in Romans 12:15, we should “rejoice with those who rejoice” and “weep with those who weep.” But we can’t do that very well unless we’re concerned for each other. So this is a good kind of concern. Paul wasn’t opposed to being concerned in this way at all.

And we have a good example of this kind of concern in Philippians 2. In verse 19 Paul told the Christians in Philippi that he wanted to send Timothy to them soon. And in verse 20 he explained why he wanted to send Timothy and not someone else. He said, “For I have no one else like-minded who will genuinely care about your interests.” Now this doesn’t mean that Paul didn’t have other trustworthy companions. But God had equipped Timothy to minister to others in a special way. He had a remarkable ability to empathize with his fellow believers. Paul knew that Timothy would genuinely care about the Philippian believers and their welfare. The Greek word for care in that verse is the same word for concerned that we have in 1 Corinthians 7:32.

So the Greek word for concerned is sometimes used positively in the New Testament. But it can also be used negatively as well. That’s how Paul used it at the end of his letter to the Philippians. In chapter 4 and verse 6 he said, “Don’t worry about anything, but in everything, through prayer and petition with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.” In that passage the word “worry” comes from the same Greek verb for concerned that we’ve been looking at. And clearly Paul was using it with a different nuance here. That’s why the Christian Standard Bible has the word “worry” instead of “concerned” here. He was talking about something that we should never do. There’s nothing wrong with being concerned about something, but we should not worry about anything.

And Paul was just drawing on the teaching of Jesus when he told us not to worry. This Greek verb is used 12 times outside Paul’s letters, and all of them are found in Matthew and Luke. Jesus used this word six times at the end of Matthew 6. In verse 25 he started by saying, “Don’t worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Isn’t life more than food and the body more than clothing?” Then in the rest of the chapter Jesus expanded on this theme. He explained that God takes care of the animals, and so he will take care of us as well. But there’s a prerequisite, and it’s found in verse 33. Jesus said, “But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these

things will be provided for you.” So God will provide for our needs as long as we’re putting him first in our lives and striving to live in obedience to him.

But we also see this Greek word for worry or concern in Luke’s Gospel. And once again we can find it used a lot in one chapter. In Luke 12 we have a lot of the same teaching that we saw in Matthew 6. But this word is also used in a fascinating story in Luke 10. In this chapter Jesus was teaching at Mary and Martha’s home. But these two women responded to his presence in different ways. Verse 39 says that Mary “sat at the Lord’s feet and was listening to what he said.” But verse 40 says that “Martha was distracted by her many tasks, and she came up and asked, ‘Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to serve alone? So tell her to give me a hand.’” Then in verses 41–42 “the Lord answered her, ‘Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has made the right choice, and it will not be taken away from her.’”

So in verse 41 Jesus said that Martha was worried, and he used the same Greek word that we’ve been looking at. Now I don’t think he was saying that there’s anything inherently wrong with doing household tasks. Martha clearly had a servant’s heart, and that’s a good thing! But she didn’t understand that there was something even better than what she was doing. She had the opportunity to sit under the teaching of Jesus! She should have prioritized learning from Jesus over doing household tasks. To paraphrase Solomon in Ecclesiastes 3, there’s a time for doing chores, and there’s a time for listening to Jesus. Martha should not have criticized Mary for choosing Jesus over chores in that moment. Instead she should have followed her sister’s example.

So I think this story is an excellent illustration of what Paul was talking about in 1 Corinthians 7:32. He wasn’t saying that it’s wrong to have various concerns. Life is full of things that we need to give our attention to. For example, we should strive to keep our bodies clean and healthy. So there are certain things that we just can’t avoid being concerned about. We shouldn’t worry about those things, but we shouldn’t ignore them either. So I don’t think Paul was saying in this verse that we should strive to be completely free from concerns. Otherwise he basically contradicted himself at the end of the verse, because he talked about something that we should be concerned about! So I think Paul was probably using hyperbole once again, just like we saw in the previous paragraph. In other words, he was exaggerating to make a point here. He was saying that one thing is worthy of more concern than anything else. And his desire was for people to be able to focus on that concern as much as possible.

So this is why Paul was a big fan of singleness. He said in verse 32 that “the unmarried man is concerned about the things of the Lord.” The point here is that a single person can focus more attention on the things of the Lord than a married person can. The word “Lord” here is clearly a reference to Jesus, just like we saw back in verse 25. Paul was reminding us that Jesus is our master; he deserves our ultimate loyalty and complete obedience. And at the end of verse 32 Paul explained how we show concern for the things of the Lord. It means that we focus on how we can please the Lord. The Greek word for please is used 17 times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote 14 of them. Four of these occurrences are in this letter, and three of them are right here in verses 32–34. And this word basically means “to bring pleasure to someone.” And of course the focus here is on the importance of bringing pleasure to the Lord. There is

no one more important for us to please than Jesus. After all, he died on the cross and paid the penalty for our sins!

Now I don't think Paul was saying that only unmarried men can be concerned about pleasing the Lord. He was just saying that it's easier for unmarried people to focus on the things of the Lord. And in verse 33 he gave us some clarification on this issue. He said, "But the married man is concerned about the things of the world—how he may please his wife." So this verse starts with the word "but," which introduces a contrast with the previous verse. Paul was making a comparison between the unmarried man and the married man. Next week we're going to see a similar comparison between a married woman and an unmarried woman.

But look at what Paul said about the married man. He said that the married man is concerned about the things of the world. Paul used the same Greek word for concerned that we just saw in the previous verse. But this time the concern is focused on the things of the world. The Greek word for world is also a term that we've seen recently. Paul just used it in verse 31 when he said that "this world in its current form is passing away." And in that verse we concluded that Paul was not talking about the people of the world. And he also wasn't talking about the evil world system, which is a set of principles that are opposed to God. Instead he was talking about the world as a place. He was saying that one day this planet is going to be destroyed.

And so I think Paul was still talking about the world as a place here in verse 33. A married man is concerned about things that characterize the world in its current form. Jesus said in Matthew 22:30 that once we're raised from dead, we won't be married to a fellow human being anymore. So our life is going to be significantly different when we're living on the new earth. There won't be any married men anymore! But while we're living on this current earth, there's the option for a man to be married. And in that case he will be concerned about the things of the world. Paul clarified at the end of the verse and said that he was talking about how a man can please his wife.

The Greek word for please is the same one that we just saw in verse 32. I told you that Paul wrote 14 of the 17 occurrences of this word in the New Testament. But I haven't taken you to any cross references yet. So let's look at a few of them now. In 1 Thessalonians 2 Paul talked about the ministry that he and his companions had in Thessalonica. In verses 3–4 he said, "For our exhortation didn't come from error or impurity or an intent to deceive. Instead, just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not to please people, but rather God, who examines our hearts." So in this verse Paul made it clear that his motivation was to please God instead of people. When push came to shove, he would rather bring pleasure to God instead of people.

But this doesn't mean that it's wrong to please people. In Romans 15:2 Paul said that "each one of us is to please his neighbor for his good, to build him up." In that passage Paul was talking about believers who had a strong conscience or a weak conscience in different areas. And his goal wasn't to tell us what exactly our convictions should be in these different areas. Instead his priority was for us to please each other and build each other up. So there's a sense in which we should please fellow believers as long as

we're ultimately pleasing God. In fact, Paul even said in 1 Corinthians 10 that there's a sense in which we should please everyone. Listen to what he said in verses 32–33: "Give no offense to Jews or Greeks or the church of God, just as I also try to please everyone in everything, not seeking my own benefit, but the benefit of many, so that they may be saved."

So Paul wanted to please everyone in the sense that they could be saved. Now he wasn't saying that we should never confront them about their sin. That's an essential part of sharing the gospel with unbelievers. They need to understand that their sin has separated them from the holy God of the universe and that they're under his judgment. Only then does the good news that Jesus died for them make sense. So we do need to share hard truths with unbelievers, but this doesn't mean that we should be mean or rude to them. We need to speak the truth to them in love. We should treat them well and try to please them as much as possible so that they will listen to our message. Our goal should be to seek their benefit instead of our own benefit. We should be motivated not by our comfort but by their need for salvation.

So when Paul said in 1 Corinthians 7:33 that the married man is concerned about how he can please his wife, Paul was not saying that this is a bad thing. There is nothing inherently wrong with pleasing other people. Paul did that all the time during his ministry, and we need to do it as well! But a married man has an additional obligation to please his wife. He needs to love her as Christ loved the church. He needs to spend time with her and get to know her well. He needs to provide for her and meet her needs. He needs to shepherd her and lead her to greater spiritual maturity. And he needs to bring her physical intimacy, as Paul talked about earlier in this chapter. An unmarried man does not need to be concerned about any of these things.

So Paul wasn't making a comparison between right and wrong here. He wasn't saying that a married man cannot please the Lord. In fact, when a husband loves his wife properly, he's pleasing the Lord! But when a husband is focused on pleasing his wife, he can't do other things that please the Lord. If a married man is spending time with his wife, then he can't focus his attention in that moment on evangelism. That's assuming of course that his wife is a believer. And if a married man is taking his wife on a date, then he can't lead a Bible study at that time. Because Paul wasn't married, he didn't need to work a full-time job to provide for a family. He just worked as a tentmaker part-time to provide for himself as needed.

So there's nothing wrong with being married. But if a man is married, then Paul said in the beginning of verse 34 that "his interests are divided." Now there's actually no Greek word here that means "interests." The NET Bible has a more literal translation here. It says, "He is divided." The Greek word for divided is used 14 times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote five of them. Three of these occurrences are found in this letter, and we've already seen the first two. We just saw the second one back in verse 17 of this chapter. In that verse it's translated with the word "assigned" in the Christian Standard Bible, and that's one of the nuances that this word can have.

But in chapter 1 and verse 13 we see the other nuance of this word. In that verse the Christian Standard Bible has the word "divided." Paul was rebuking the Corinthian believers for their divisions in the church. But here in chapter 7 and verse 34 Paul was talking about the problem of an individual being divided.

The idea is that a married man's attention is divided between his wife and the Lord. He needs to be concerned about how to please her and how to please the Lord. The Greek word for divided is actually a verb in the perfect tense. So it refers to a completed action with ongoing results. The completed action took place at the time of marriage, and from that point on the husband's attention is divided between his wife and the Lord.

But once again we need to make sure that we don't get out of balance here. It's not wrong for a married man to please his wife. God wants us to please our spouse if we're married. And we can certainly bring pleasure to God if we're doing that well. But Paul's focus here was on priorities. If we're married, we can't prioritize other spiritual activities as much as single people can. So if you're single, you should not think of yourself as a second-class citizen in God's kingdom. You have flexibility to serve the Lord that married people don't have! It's easier for you to do serve the Lord in a variety of ways than for married people. Singleness is truly a gift from God that we should treasure. We should treasure it while we're single, and if we choose to get married, we should appreciate the single believers around us and encourage them to take advantage of the wonderful ways that they can serve the Lord. Let's close in prayer.