

1 CORINTHIANS 7:34B

April 23, 2023

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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 in verse 31 that “this world in its current form is passing away.” The point here is that one day the earth is going to be destroyed, and God's going to create a new one. And when we're living on the new earth, there won't be any more human marriage. Our temporary marriages are going to be replaced by our permanent marriage to Jesus. So we should find ultimate joy and satisfaction in our relationship with the Lord, not in human marriage. 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.

Then in verses 32–35 Paul began a new paragraph where he continued to talk about the value of singleness. And last week we covered verse 32, verse 33, and the very beginning of verse 34. Let's review this passage before we continue. Paul wrote, “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.” So Paul started verse 32 by giving his personal desire for the Christians in Corinth. He wanted the single believers to remain unmarried, but he did not give them a command about it. Instead he just said that he wanted them to be without concerns. But he didn't mean that all concerns are bad. He went on to clarify that “the unmarried man is concerned about the things of the Lord.”

The Greek word for concerned is a verb that comes from the same root as the Greek word translated “without concerns” earlier in the verse. This verb is used four times here in verses 32–34, but it's also used 14 other times in the New Testament. And this word can be used both positively and negatively. In Philippians 2:20 he said that Timothy was concerned about the interests of others. So that's a good kind of

concern. But then in Philippians 4:6 Paul used the same Greek word to tell us not to worry about anything. He was talking about a bad kind of concern that is so strong that it involves worry. So it's not inherently 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 when Paul said in 1 Corinthians 7:32 that he wanted single believers to be without concerns, I think he was using hyperbole. In other words, he was exaggerating to make a point here. He was just 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. He wanted believers to be concerned about the things of the Lord. And he recommended singleness because a single person can focus more attention than a married person on the things of the Lord. But what does it mean to be concerned about the things of the Lord? Paul answered that question at the end of verse 32. It means that we focus on how we can please the Lord. Jesus is our master, and so he deserves our ultimate loyalty and complete obedience. As Christians our focus should be on pleasing him.

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 in this verse Paul made a comparison between the unmarried man and the married man. He 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. Paul was probably talking about the world as a place, just like he was in verse 31. He was saying that a married man is concerned about things that characterize the world in its current form. Life is going to be significantly different when we're living on the new earth, because there won't be human marriage 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. At the end of verse 33 Paul gave some clarification and said that he was talking about how a man can please his wife. The Greek word for please is the same one that Paul used at the end of verse 32 where he talked about the importance of pleasing the Lord. So we might think that it would be wrong for us to please people. But in Romans 15:2 Paul used this same Greek word to say that "each one of us is to please his neighbor for his good, to build him up." So there is a sense in which we should try to please other people. We just need to make sure that our ultimate priority is on pleasing God.

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. He wasn't making a comparison between right and wrong here. A married man should try to please to 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. So when a husband loves his wife properly, he's actually 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. A married man may also need to work more to provide for his family. Paul only had to work part-time as a tentmaker to provide for himself.

So if a Christian man is married, then we can summarize his situation with Paul's statement at the beginning of verse 34: "His interests are divided." The NET Bible actually has a more literal translation here; it just says that "he is divided." Now we already saw the Greek word for divided back in chapter 1 and verse 13, where Paul rebuked 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. So 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 singleness is not something that we should minimize or look down on. It's a gift from God that we should treasure.

Not let's look at the rest of verse 34. We're ready to cover some new material. Look at what Paul wrote in verse 34: "The unmarried woman or virgin is concerned about the things of the Lord, so that she may be holy both in body and in spirit. But the married woman is concerned about the things of the world—how she may please her husband." So in the rest of verses 32–33 Paul was giving us the male perspective, but then in verse 34 he also gave us the female perspective. And he connected these two perspectives with a conjunction in the original Greek text. It's normally translated with the word "and." Most translations don't give us this word here, but I did find it in the English Standard Version. Paul was just adding a statement about women to go with his statement on men.

And 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."

Now look at what Paul said in verse 28: "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.” At the end of verse 27 Paul advised single men not to get married. But here in verse 28 he clarified and told them that it wasn’t wrong for them to get married. And then he said exactly the same thing about single women. 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.

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 7:32–33 Paul talked about men, but then he made a similar statement about women. And he used a lot of the same Greek words in both of these statements. But there are also a few differences here as well, and so I created a handout to help you see the similarities and the differences. On the left side I’ve put verses 32 and 33 as well as the very beginning of verse 34. Then on the right side I’ve put the rest of verse 34. And I’ve lined up the phrases that are similar to each other. So after the opening statement in verse 32, you can see that we have the phrase “the unmarried man.” And in verse 34 we have the very similar phrase “the unmarried woman.” And Paul said the same thing about both of them. He said that each one “is concerned about the things of the Lord.”

But notice that there’s something extra on the right side about the unmarried woman. Paul added the phrase “or virgin” here. The Greek word for virgin is the same one that we’ve already seen in verses 25 and 28. 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 was obvious when we looked at verse 28 that Paul was using it to refer only to female virgins. Now we’re seeing the same thing here in verse 34. Paul already talked about men in verses 32–33, and here in verse 34 he was talking about women.

But Bible scholars have struggled to understand why Paul referred to both unmarried women and virgins here in verse 34. And part of the problem is that the ancient copies of the New Testament do not agree with each other at this point. That’s why the King James Version and the New King James Version are quite different from most translations at the beginning of this verse. The New King James Version says, “There is a difference between a wife and a virgin.” Then it continues by talking about the unmarried woman. So these two translations add the reference to a wife alongside the virgin, and they’re put at the very beginning of the verse. Now the unmarried woman is by herself in the next sentence, and there’s really no more tension here.

But there are several problems with this approach. First of all, it’s based on later copies of the New Testa-

ment. The oldest copies of the New Testament are generally the most reliable. And these early copies don't support what we find in the King James Version and the New King James Version. The second problem with these translations here is that they've mistranslated the Greek word for divided. It simply does not mean "difference" as these translations have given to us. Those words sort of sound similar in English, but they have distinct meanings. So the better approach here is to follow all the other conservative Bible translations. In other words, Paul was not talking about women but about men at the very beginning of verse 34.

But we're left with the problem of how to understand this phrase "unmarried woman or virgin." And the next thing we need to observe is that there is no Greek word that means "or" here. The Greek conjunction in this phrase is the same one that we saw at the beginning of this sentence. It just means "and," which is the word that we see in the Legacy Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible. Now this may not seem like a big deal, but the problem here is that the Greek verb for concerned is not plural but singular. Normally when we have a compound subject in both English and Greek, the verb is plural. Let me give you an example: "Bob and Nancy are here today." "Bob" and "Nancy" are both subjects, and so the verb is plural. But if I just say that Nancy is here today, then the verb is singular instead.

So why did Paul use a singular verb here when he seemed to be giving us two subjects? Well, I think the best answer is that he wasn't really giving us two subjects! Instead he just gave us one subject: "The unmarried woman." The Greek word for unmarried is the same one that Paul used back in verse 32 to refer to the unmarried man. It's used only four times in the New Testament, and all four of them are here in this chapter. The first one was back in verse 8, where Paul was probably referring specifically to widowers or men whose wives have died. Then we saw the word again in verse 11, where it clearly refers to a divorced woman. So this word can refer to any unmarried person, and if it has a more specific nuance, the context usually makes that clear.

And here in verse 34 I think the context is very clear. We just saw the word used in verse 32 to refer to any unmarried man. So in verse 34 I think it has to refer to any unmarried woman. This woman could be widowed, divorced, or never married. So why would Paul go on to use the word "virgin" as well? I think the answer is very simple: that's the main theme of this section! In verse 25 Paul started by saying, "Now about virgins." So it makes sense that he would use that word throughout verses 25–40. He wasn't talking about a separate group of women here in verse 34. He was just giving an example of a type of single woman from the broader group of unmarried women. He wanted to give special attention to these women who had never been married and had never experienced sexual intimacy. Paul was trying to give advice to these women and the men who might be interested in marrying them.

So when Paul referred to the unmarried woman and the virgin, I believe we should be thinking about the word "virgin" as a parenthetical remark. In other words, the phrase "and the virgin" belongs in parentheses. The Legacy Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible seem to be taking a similar approach. They're just using commas instead of parentheses. But I would prefer to use parentheses here because they convey the idea of a parenthetical remark much better. That way it's clear that only the unmarried woman is the subject of the verb. In fact, we could improve this translation even more by changing

the word “and” to the word “including.” So here’s my translation: “And the unmarried woman (including the virgin) is concerned about the things of the Lord.”

Now the Greek verb here for concerned is the same one that we already saw in verse 32 as well as verse 33. And the phrase “the things of the Lord” comes from exactly the same Greek wording that Paul used in verse 32. So Paul was saying the same thing about the unmarried woman that he was saying about the unmarried man. Both of these people have tremendous flexibility to serve the Lord in a wide variety of areas. But in verse 32 Paul added a phrase that we don’t see here in verse 34. He clarified what it means to be concerned about the things of the Lord by saying, “How he may please the Lord.” But in verse 34 we do not have the phrase “how she may please the Lord.” Instead Paul made a substitution here. The equivalent in baseball would be using a pinch hitter. Well, Paul’s pinch hitter was the phrase “so that she may be holy both in body and in spirit.” This statement is giving the purpose for an unmarried woman to remain single.

Now many well-meaning Christians have concluded on the basis of this statement that it’s more holy to avoid marriage and sexual relations. This view is called asceticism, and it’s why priests in the Roman Catholic Church are not allowed to get married. But we should be careful not to go this far in our interpretation. The Greek word for holy does not always refer to being separate from sin. Sometimes it just has the general idea of being set apart for a special purpose. We’ve already seen this word 12 times in this letter, and the most recent one is in verse 14 of this chapter. In that verse Paul said that the children of a marriage between a believer and an unbeliever are holy. And what he meant is that they’re set apart to receive a special Christian witness and influence from their believing parent.

So in verse 34 I think Paul was using the word “holy” in a similar way. He was saying that a single Christian woman is set apart for God in a way that a married Christian woman is not. A married Christian woman does not have the same flexibility to serve the Lord that a single Christian woman has. And Paul stressed this fact by saying that the unmarried woman is “holy both in body and in spirit.” The word “body” is a reference to the material aspect of our being, and the word “spirit” is a reference to the immaterial aspect of our being. Now the Greek word for spirit often refers to the Holy Spirit, and we’ve already seen that nuance of the word at least ten times in this letter. But here this word clearly is talking about a person’s human spirit.

So the point here is that a single Christian woman can be totally dedicated to the Lord with her whole being. Now Paul wasn’t saying that a married Christian woman cannot be totally dedicated to God. She’s just more limited in what she can do to serve the Lord. And Paul ended this verse by giving a comparison between the unmarried woman and the married woman. He said, “But the married woman is concerned about the things of the world—how she may please her husband.” This statement is exactly the same as what we saw in verse 33 except that the genders are switched. So Paul was saying the same thing here about the married woman that he said about the married man. To be concerned about the things of the world is not wrong. Paul was talking about how a married woman can please her husband.

And that’s what a married Christian woman should be focused on to a large degree. There’s a sense in

which her body belongs to her husband. And she needs to use her mind, her emotions, and her will to serve her family. She should be using both her body and her spirit to bless her husband and her children. And as she does that, she is certainly pleasing to the Lord. But a single woman does not need to be concerned about submitting to a husband and being a helper for him. She doesn't need to be concerned about giving sexual intimacy to a husband. And if she's a virgin, then she doesn't need to be concerned about raising children. She has enormous freedom to use her body and her spirit for the Lord in a variety of ways. Amy Carmichael is a good example of a Christian woman who never married and was able to serve the Lord in amazing ways.

But we need to be careful not to take verse 34 and run wild with it. We should remember that Paul was just giving advice here and not commands. And he gave this advice in light of the present crisis. The difficult situation that the Corinthian believers were going through was a big part of why Paul recommended singleness so strongly. But in another letter and a different context Paul took a different approach. In 1 Timothy 5:14 he said, "I want younger women to marry, have children, manage their households, and give the adversary no opportunity to accuse us." Now most translations say that Paul was talking about younger widows here, and that's a better interpretation because Paul talked extensively about widows in this chapter. But I think this verse can also apply by extension to virgins who strongly desire to be married.

And even in 1 Corinthians 7 we see Paul saying something similar. He recommended singleness throughout this chapter, but in verse 9 he said that if widows and widowers "do not have self-control, they should marry, since it is better to marry than to burn with desire." And once again I think this verse also has application for virgins and other single people. So we need to make sure that we maintain a careful balance in our understanding of marriage and singleness. We should not take individual statements in Scripture out of context and twist them so that they say whatever we want them to say. We need to interpret Scripture in light of Scripture and make sure that everything fits together. God's Word never contradicts itself. And what Scripture teaches is that both singleness and marriage are good gifts from God. Our goal regardless of our marital status should be to obey the Lord and devote every aspect of our being to pleasing him. Let's close in prayer.