

# 1 CORINTHIANS 7:35

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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 he started in verse 32 by giving his personal desire for Christians in Corinth. He wanted them to be without concerns. But he wasn't saying that all concerns are bad, because he went on to say that “the unmarried man is concerned about the things of the Lord—how he may please the Lord.” So Paul was using hyperbole 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 on the things of the Lord than a married person can.

So Paul wasn't 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 that's because of what Paul said in verse 33. He said that “the married man is concerned about the things of the world—how he may please his wife.” So married men can't just be concerned about the things of the Lord. They also need to be concerned about the things of the world. Paul was probably talking about the world as a place, just

like he was back in verse 31. He was saying that a married man is concerned about things that characterize the world in its current form, like human marriage. So a married man is concerned about how to please his wife.

Now we might think that we should only please the Lord and that it's wrong to please other people. But in Romans 15:2 Paul said 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, as long as our ultimate priority is on pleasing God. So there's nothing inherently wrong with a married man pleasing his wife. After all, God commands husbands to love their wives. 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. That's why Paul said in 1 Corinthians 7:34 that a married man's interests are divided. The point is that his attention is divided between his wife and the Lord. So Paul's focus here was on priorities. Married people can't prioritize as many spiritual activities as single people can.

And in the rest of verse 34 Paul turned the tables and said basically the same thing about women. He said that "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 once again Paul made a comparison between the unmarried person and the married person. But this time he added a reference to the virgin. And Bible scholars have struggled to understand why Paul referred to both unmarried women and virgins here in verse 34. This issue is especially tricky because Paul used a singular verb in the original Greek. And normally when there is a compound subject, the verb is plural.

So I think the best solution here is that Paul was giving us only one subject here: "The unmarried woman." Then he mentioned the virgin as an example of an unmarried woman. After all, Paul was focused on virgins in verses 25–40. He was giving special attention to these women who had never been married and had never experienced sexual intimacy. So the word "virgin" should probably be in parentheses here in verse 34. And we could also change the word "or" to the word "including." This way it's clear that Paul was not talking about two separate groups here. He was just saying that "the unmarried woman (including the virgin) is concerned about the things of the Lord."

But when Paul clarified this phrase, he didn't use the same wording that we saw in verse 32. He didn't use the phrase "how she may please the Lord." Instead Paul made a substitution here. He said, "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.

So I think Paul was just 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. 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. That’s because she’s “concerned about the things of the world—how she may please her husband.” And as a married Christian woman submits to her husband and pleases him, she is certainly pleasing to the Lord.

But a single woman does not need to be concerned about submitting to a husband and pleasing him. She has enormous freedom to use her body and her spirit for the Lord in a variety of ways. And this is one of the reasons that Paul recommended singleness for both men and women. But we need to remember that Paul was just giving advice here and not commands. We need to 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.

Now let’s move on to 1 Corinthians 7:35. We’re ready to cover some new material. Look at what Paul wrote in this verse: “I am saying this for your own benefit, not to put a restraint on you, but to promote what is proper and so that you may be devoted to the Lord without distraction.” Now this verse actually begins with a conjunction in the original Greek. It’s not translated in the Christian Standard Bible or most other translations, but we should try to represent it as best as we can. It’s a pretty flexible conjunction, and normally it’s translated with the word “but” or the word “and.” But here I don’t think either one of those words fits very well. Paul wasn’t making a contrast here, and he wasn’t simply adding another thought. Instead he was bringing an end to the paragraph that he started in verse 32. So I think the word “now” works best here because it indicates a transition to the conclusion of this paragraph.

Then Paul gave us the phrase “I am saying this.” But what did he mean by the word “this”? Sometimes this word points forward to something that an author proceeded to say. We can look back at verse 29 to see an example of this usage. In verse 29 Paul said, “This is what I mean, brothers and sisters.” And then Paul went on to talk about what he meant by the word “this.” He said, “The time is limited, so from now on those who have wives should be as though they had none.” But here in verse 35 it’s obvious that the word “this” is pointing backward, not forward. Paul was referring back to what he just said in verses 32–34 about the benefit of singleness. He was going to make some comments about his motivation for recommending singleness.

And look at the first thing that Paul said about his motivation. He wrote, “I am saying this for your own benefit.” Notice that the Christian Standard Bible doesn’t just have the phrase “your benefit.” It has the longer phrase “your own benefit.” There are two pronouns in the original Greek here. The first one is a second person plural pronoun, which is translated with the word “your.” The second one is normally a

third person pronoun. But here it's modifying the second person pronoun and adding emphasis to it. And the word "own" is a good way to represent that emphasis in English. This word is used in most of the major conservative Bible translations.

So Paul was emphasizing the fact that he wrote verses 32–34 for the benefit of the Corinthian believers and by extension all believers. The Greek word for benefit is used only twice in the New Testament, and the other one is found right here in this letter. It's found in chapter 10 and verse 33. In verses 32–33 Paul said, "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." This is one of the passages that we looked at a few weeks ago when we were studying the Greek word for please in chapter 7 and verses 32–34. But this passage also has the Greek word for benefit that's in chapter 7 and verse 35. In both places Paul was stressing that he did not seek his own benefit. In chapter 10 he sought the benefit of unbelievers so that they could be saved. And in chapter 7 he sought the benefit of believers.

Now this Greek word for benefit doesn't refer to something that's right as opposed to wrong. Instead it refers to something that's better than what is simply good. So Paul was not teaching the Corinthian believers about singleness to guard them against sin. He was teaching them about singleness because it would be helpful for them. He wanted to give them some good advice and teach them how to be wise in the area of singleness and marriage. This is one of many aspects in the Christian life in which we have important decisions to make, but they're not a matter of right and wrong. Instead they're simply a matter of wisdom. God has given us freedom in a variety of areas in the Christian life, but with that freedom we also have a responsibility to be wise. And Paul's teaching on singleness was designed to benefit us and make us wise.

Now let's look at the second thing that Paul said in 1 Corinthians 7:35 about his motivation for recommending singleness. He said that his motivation was "not to put a restraint on you." So in this phrase Paul told us what was not motivating him. He was not recommending singleness to put a restraint on us. The Greek word for restraint is used only here in the New Testament. But it is used three times in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, which is called the Septuagint. And all three of them are found in the Book of Proverbs. Let's look at the last of them. In Proverbs 22:24–25 Solomon wrote, "Don't make friends with an angry person, and don't be a companion of a hot-tempered one, or you will learn his ways and entangle yourself in a snare." In the Septuagint the Greek word for snare is the same one that Paul used in our passage.

So Solomon used a hunting metaphor to describe what happens when we are friends with a person who is habitually angry. When we hang out with a person who has a hot temper, there's a tendency for us to become like that person, even if we're not trying to. And in that case Solomon said that we've entangled ourselves in a snare. We've gotten trapped just like a wild animal gets captured by a hunter. So in 1 Corinthians 7:35 Paul used this same hunting metaphor to describe what he was not doing. He was not recommending singleness to catch single Christians in a snare! He was not putting a restraint on them and restricting them. In other words, he was not giving them a command to remain unmarried. Paul made that very clear throughout this section. He just wanted us to understand the benefits of singleness.

Now let's look at the third thing that Paul said in verse 35 about his motivation for recommending singleness. He said that his motivation was "to promote what is proper." Notice that the word "but" appears right before this phrase. Paul was giving us a contrast between the second and third things that he said about his motivation for recommending singleness. The second statement was negative, but the third statement was positive. He was motivated to promote what is proper. Now there's actually no Greek word for promote here. Instead Paul just used the same preposition that we saw earlier in the sentence. There it's translated with the word "for," and the King James Version and the New King James Version use the word "for" again here as well. But the Christian Standard Bible uses the word "promote" because it's smoother, and so do several other translations like the English Standard Version, the Legacy Standard Bible, and the New American Standard Bible.

So Paul was motivated to promote what is proper. The Greek word for proper is used five times in the New Testament. Paul wrote two of them, and the other one is also found in this letter. Turn to chapter 12, and let's look at verses 23–25. In these verses Paul wrote, "And those parts of the body that we consider less honorable, we clothe these with greater honor, and our unrespectable parts are treated with greater respect, which our respectable parts do not need. Instead, God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the less honorable, so that there would be no division in the body, but that the members would have the same concern for each other."

So in this passage Paul was comparing the church to a human body. We're like different parts of the body that work together so that the body can function properly. But some of our body parts are not as respectable as others. And that word "respectable" comes from the same Greek word that we have in chapter 7 and verse 35. So what does it mean that some of our body parts are not respectable? It just means that it's not appropriate for us to display them. Instead we cover them with clothing. But other parts of our body are more respectable and don't need be covered. This Greek word for respectable is also used in Mark 15:43, where it refers to Joseph of Arimathea, who was a prominent member of the Sanhedrin. We also see this word twice in Acts to refer to prominent people. And in these three verses the word is referring to people who are worthy of admiration and respect.

So in chapter 7 and verse 35 Paul was motivated to promote what is proper or respectable. Now this doesn't mean that we should just promote whatever the world considers to be respectable. Our ungodly culture promotes many people and things that are not worthy of respect and admiration. Unbiblical ideas are becoming more and more prominent. So when Paul talked about what is proper, he was talking about what is respectable in God's eyes. It's respectable in God's eyes for a person to remain single and avoid engaging in any kind of sexual activity. Our ungodly culture wants to remove all sexual boundaries and promote the idea that single people can have sex anytime they want with anyone they want. But we need to stand firmly on God's Word and refuse to compromise in this area. We need to make sure that we always strive to do what is respectable in God's eyes.

Now let's look at the fourth and last thing that Paul said in verse 35 about his motivation for recommending singleness. He said that it was "so that you may be devoted to the Lord without distraction." Notice that the word "and" appears right before this statement. Paul was just adding a final element of his moti-

vation to the previous phrase. And this one is stated positively just like the last one. Then the Christian Standard Bible has the phrase “so that you may be.” But this phrase doesn’t come from the Greek text. The next word in the Greek text is just the word for devoted. But most translations insert some kind of phrase here to make the text smoother and easier to read.

So let’s move on to the Greek word for devoted. This word is used only here in the New Testament, and it’s not even used anywhere in the Greek translation of the Old Testament. But most English translations have the word “devotion” here, including the English Standard Version, the Legacy Standard Bible, the New American Standard Bible, and the New International Version. So this Greek word has to do with being devoted to someone and constantly serving that person. And of course Paul was talking about being devoted to the Lord here in verse 35. We’ve seen this word “Lord” several times recently. It appears once in verse 25, twice in verse 32, and once in verse 34. And in each case it seems to be referring to Jesus. So I think Paul was talking Jesus here in verse 35 as well.

Now the Greek word for Lord usually just means “master.” It normally stresses the idea of authority, and so it shows here that Jesus is in charge and that we must submit to him. Scripture does not support the idea that we don’t need to trust in Jesus as our Lord to be saved. Acts 16:31 tells us that we must believe in the Lord Jesus to be saved. And Romans 10:13 says that “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” So we can’t receive Jesus as our Savior without also recognizing him as our Lord. We can’t be saved without submitting to his lordship over our lives. And when Paul referred to Jesus as the Lord here in 1 Corinthians 7:35, he was assuming that all the Corinthian believers considered Jesus to be their master. And that’s why Paul was motivated to help them be devoted to Jesus.

So Paul recommended singleness because it provided an excellent way to be devoted to the Lord. This statement is pointing us back to what Paul was saying in verses 32–34, where he said that the unmarried person is concerned about the things of the Lord. Paul was just saying that an unmarried Christian can be devoted to the Lord in ways that a married Christian cannot. But all believers should be devoted to serving the Lord. In Romans 12:11 Paul said, “Do not lack diligence in zeal; be fervent in the Spirit; serve the Lord.” So God expects every Christian to serve him. And believers who are married can certainly do that by ministering to their spouse and raising children to know the Lord.

But single Christians have more flexibility to serve the Lord. In 1 Corinthians 7 Paul ended verse 35 by using the phrase “without distraction.” This phrase comes from one Greek word, and it’s used only here in the New Testament, just like the Greek word for devoted. And this word is also not used anywhere in the Greek translation of the Old Testament. But there is a Greek word that comes from the same root as this word. And it’s used in the story of Mary and Martha in Luke 10. Verse 39 says that Mary “sat at the Lord’s and was listening to what he said.” But verse 40 says that “Martha was distracted by her many tasks.” Now this doesn’t mean that her tasks were bad. But they were distracting her from something that was even more important. She should have taken a break from her work to listen to Jesus.

So Paul was motivated to help us learn how to be devoted to the Lord without distraction. Single Christians should understand that marriage brings many distractions. Those distractions aren’t necessarily

bad. But sometimes they can pull us away from things that are more important. So believers who are single should consider remaining unmarried. But many single people struggle with self-control in the area of sexuality. And Paul said in 1 Corinthians 7:9 that “if they do not have self-control, they should marry, since it is better to marry than to burn with desire.” So for many single people it would be difficult to remain unmarried and be devoted to the Lord without distraction. That’s because sexual temptation would be a constant distraction. And so those people should probably get married instead of remaining single.

But whether we’re single or married, we should be completely devoted to the Lord Jesus. After all, he died to save us from the penalty of our sins. He took the punishment that we deserved. There’s nothing that we could ever do to repay him for what he’s done for us. So we shouldn’t serve the Lord to work for our salvation. But we should serve the Lord out of gratitude for our salvation. And we can do that whether we’re single or married. If we’re single, we have fewer distractions and can serve the Lord in a variety of ways. But if we’re married, we can still serve the Lord, especially in our family. So let’s make sure that we’re fully dedicated to the Lord’s service. Our highest motivation in life should be to bring him honor and glory. Let’s close in prayer.