

# 1 CORINTHIANS 7:36

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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 continued to talk about the value of singleness. He said in verse 32 that he wanted the Corinthian believers 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. But he did change a few things here. Instead of talking about how the unmarried woman may please the Lord, he talked about how "she may be holy both in body and in spirit." 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. 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.

Then in verse 35 Paul concluded this paragraph by making some comments about his motivation for recommending singleness. First, he was motivated for the benefit of his readers. He wanted to give them some good advice and teach them how to be wise in the area of singleness and marriage. Then he said that his motivation was not to put a restraint on his readers. The Greek word for restraint is used outside the New Testament to refer to a snare. So Paul was not trying to hunt his readers down and capture them in the snare of singleness. In other words, he was not giving single believers a command to remain unmarried. Paul made that very clear throughout this section. He just wanted them to understand the benefits of singleness.

Then Paul said that his motivation was to promote what is proper. The Greek word for proper refers to someone or something that is respectable. Now this doesn't mean that we should just promote whatever the world considers to be respectable. Paul was talking about what is respectable in God's eyes. And Paul's point here is that it's respectable in God's eyes for a person to remain single and avoid engaging in any kind of sexual activity. Then Paul said that his motivation was for us to be devoted to the Lord without distraction. Now God certainly expects all believers to be devoted to him. But marriage brings many distractions into our lives. Those distractions aren't necessarily bad, but sometimes they can pull us away from things that are more important. So there's nothing inherently wrong with getting married, but there are some significant benefits to remaining single.

Now let's move on to 1 Corinthians 7:36. We're ready to cover some new material. Look at what Paul wrote in this verse: "If any man thinks he is acting improperly toward the virgin he is engaged to, if she is getting beyond the usual age for marriage, and he feels he should marry—he can do what he wants. He is not sinning; they can get married." Now the Christian Standard Bible starts this verse with the conjunction "if." But there are actually two conjunctions in the beginning of this verse in the original Greek text. One of them normally means "if," and the other one usually means "but" or "and." And the word "but" seems to fit best here. That's what we see in the Legacy Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible. In verse 35 Paul gave his motivations for recommending singleness, but here in verse 36 he talked about how it's not a sin to get married.

So Paul began a new paragraph here in verse 36 with a slight contrast. And then he launched into a long conditional sentence. A conditional sentence 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 let's start by looking at the condition in the first half of verse 36. And notice that there are actually two conditions here. We know that because the word "if" is here twice. So let's look at the first condition. Paul said, "If any man thinks he is acting improperly toward the virgin he is engaged to." Now the Greek word for thinks is used 15 times in the New Testament. Paul wrote three of them, and two of them are right here in this letter. We already saw the other one back in verse 26, where Paul said, "Because of the present distress, I think it is good for a man to remain as he is." So this word basically refers to forming an opinion about something, and that's how Paul used it here in verse 36 as well. He talked about a man who had an opinion about how he was treating a virgin.

Now the Christian Standard Bible refers to the virgin whom this man was engaged to. But a more literal translation here is simply the phrase "his virgin." That's what we see in the New American Standard Bible. The Greek word for virgin is the same one that we've already seen in verses 25, 28, and 34. 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 verses 28 and 34 that Paul was using it to refer only to female virgins. Now we're seeing the same thing here in verse 36. Paul was addressing this conditional sentence to men, and he was talking to them about female virgins.

But what was the relationship here between a man and his virgin? There are two main ways that this relationship has been understood. The one that has been the most popular in church history is that Paul was talking about a father and his virgin daughter. The old New American Standard Bible and the Legacy Standard Bible support this interpretation. They have the phrase "his virgin daughter," but they put the word "daughter" in italics to show that it doesn't come from the original Greek text. It's been added for clarification. Now this view does make sense on the surface. In ancient cultures a virgin who was not married yet normally still lived with her parents and was under her father's authority. So it's very natural to understand the phrase "his virgin" as a reference to a father's virgin daughter.

But there are several problems with this interpretation. The first one is that we would expect to see the Greek word for daughter here if Paul was talking about a virgin's father. That's exactly what Luke did when he wrote the book of Acts and referred to Philip's daughters. In Acts 21:9 Luke said that Philip "had four virgin daughters who prophesied." So Luke didn't just use the Greek word for virgin in that verse. He also used the Greek word for daughter. And so we would expect to see the same thing in 1 Corinthians 7:36 if Paul was talking about a man's virgin daughter. But there's another problem with this interpretation. The context just doesn't support it. The focus in the previous verses is on a man who was considering the possibility of getting married to a virgin. And we should be inclined to understand this verse in the same way.

So it's more likely that Paul was talking about a man's fiancée here in verse 36. That is the majority view among Bible scholars today, and we can see it reflected in most of our modern conservative Bible translations. The Christian Standard Bible has the phrase "the virgin he is engaged to," and so does the New International Version. The English Standard Version has the phrase "his betrothed." The word "betrothed" is just an older way of referring to a person's fiancée. In fact, the New Living Translation just has the phrase "his fiancée" here. But we need to understand that engagement in the ancient world was not viewed in the same way as engagement in modern times. That's why Bible scholars often use the word "betrothed" to refer to engagement during biblical times. They want to maintain a distinction between the two types of engagement.

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

So in verse 18 we're told that Mary was engaged to Joseph. The English Standard Version, the Legacy

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

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

So in light of how engagement was viewed during biblical times, it makes good sense that Paul would talk about a man's fiancée being his virgin in 1 Corinthians 7:36. She already belonged to him in a very real way even before they were married. But in this verse Paul talked about the possibility that a man thought he was acting improperly toward his virgin. The Greek word for acting improperly is used only twice in the New Testament, and Paul wrote both of them. In fact, both of them are found right here in this letter. The other one is in chapter 13 and verse 5, where Paul said that love "is not rude." This word basically refers to behaving disgracefully or dishonorably.

But it's hard to know exactly what Paul meant by this word in chapter 7 and verse 36. Some Bible scholars think that it's a reference to sexual behavior. So perhaps the man was making sexual advances toward his fiancée. But this view doesn't really fit the context here. There is no clear reference to sexual activity anywhere else in verses 25–40. Instead the focus is on whether single people should get married or not. So I think it's more likely that Paul was talking about an engaged man who was considering the possibility of not going through with the marriage or at least putting the marriage on hold. But then this man started thinking that this approach was rude to his fiancée. He began to believe that he was acting inappropriately and behaving disgracefully or dishonorably toward her. After all, he was making her wait to enjoy the pleasures of marriage and start having children.

So we've looked at Paul's first condition in verse 36. Now let's look at his second condition. He said, "If she is getting beyond the usual age for marriage, and he feels he should marry." In this condition Paul was clarifying and expanding on what he said in his first condition. And there are actually two parts to this second condition. The first one is focused on the woman, and the second one is focused on the man. But there is some disagreement among Bible scholars about whether the first one refers to the man or the woman. The English Standard Version has the phrase "if his passions are strong," and the New International Version and the New Living Translation are similar. But this phrase is completely different from

what we see in other translations like the Christian Standard Bible, the Legacy Standard Bible, the New American Standard Bible, and the NET Bible.

So what's going on in the beginning of this second condition? Well, in the original Greek there is no subject for the verb here. Now we know that the verb is third person singular, but main verbs in Greek are not marked for gender. And so the implied subject of the verb could be either a man or a woman. But then there's just one Greek word that goes with the verb here. And this word is used only here in the New Testament. It's a compound word that has two parts. The main root refers to the highest point of something, and the prefix is a preposition that usually means "beyond." So this word seems to be referring to someone going beyond the peak of something. Just imagine climbing to the peak of a mountain and then taking a hot air balloon even higher. But the peak in verse 36 is usually considered to be either someone's age or sexual desire.

I've put together a handout with three translations of verse 36 laid side by side so that you can see the different interpretations. The Christian Standard Bible translates this one Greek word with seven English words: "getting beyond the usual age of marriage." The New American Standard Bible has the same interpretation but only uses three words: "past her youth." So both of these translations are talking about the age of the woman and how she was beyond the peak age of marriage. In ancient cultures it was very common for a woman to get married once she reached puberty so that her opportunity to have children would be maximized. But the English Standard Version has the phrase "his passions are strong," as I already mentioned. So the idea seems to be that the engaged man's sexual desires were beyond their peak. But it doesn't really make sense to talk about sexual desires going beyond their highest point.

So I'm inclined to follow the interpretation in the Christian Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible. I think Paul was probably talking about an engaged woman going beyond the peak age for maximizing her childbearing years. And this view fits perfectly with the first condition about a man acting improperly toward his virgin since that statement seems to be talking about a man making his fiancée wait to get married. Now this doesn't mean that it's wrong for a woman to get married when she's in her twenties or even later. It's very rare in our culture today for women to get married when they're in their teens. Paul wasn't commenting on whether it's right or wrong for a woman to get married right after she reaches puberty. He was talking about a man who was already engaged to a woman when she reached puberty, and this man believed he would be acting inappropriately to make her wait to get married.

And that's basically what Paul was saying at the end of his second condition. The Christian Standard Bible has the phrase "and he feels he should marry." A more literal translation is found in the New American Standard Bible, which has the phrase "and it ought to be so." But I think that the Christian Standard Bible is interpreting the Greek text correctly. There's a Greek word here that expresses the idea of obligation, and it seems to be referring to the man's sense of obligation to marry his fiancée without delay. So I believe that Paul was basically talking about an engaged man who was considering the possibility of either terminating his engagement or at least delaying his marriage. But he ended up feeling obligated to go through with the marriage immediately because he didn't want to make his fiancée wait past the normal age for a woman to get married.

So what did Paul say to a man who was in this situation? In the end of verse 36 he said, “He can do what he wants. He is not sinning; they can get married.” There are three short statements here. The first and third ones are stated positively, and the second one is stated negatively. In the first statement Paul used the same Greek word for wants that we just saw in verse 32. In that verse Paul said, “I want you to be without concerns.” So he was talking about his personal desire for the Corinthian believers, and in verse 36 he was talking about the personal desire of this engaged man. His desire was clearly to get married, and Paul confirmed that idea in the third statement when he said that they could get married.

Now in these first and third statements Paul actually used an imperative in the third person. Now imperatives are normally commands, and they’re usually given in the second person. I give these kinds of commands to my kids all the time. For example, I might tell one of them, “Set the table.” That command is in the second person because the word “you” is implied. So a second person command is given directly to the listener or the reader. But a third person command is not as direct. Here’s an example: “Somebody help me!” That command is given more indirectly to people in general. And in verse 36 Paul was not giving his commands directly to his readers. He was basically saying, “If this situation applies to you, then here’s a command that I want to throw out there.”

But most translations don’t interpret the imperatives at the end of this verse as commands. After all, if Paul was giving commands here, then he was basically telling these engaged couples that they had to get married. They didn’t have a choice in the matter if the conditions here were true. But the next two verses blow that interpretation out of the water. We’re going to see that there’s another option for these engaged couples to consider. They could choose to remain single. And so this is one of the rare cases in which an imperative has the nuance of permission. We saw the same thing in verse 15 when Paul gave permission for a believer to get divorced from an unbeliever if the unbeliever wants to leave the marriage. But he wasn’t commanding divorce in that situation. He was just giving permission for divorce.

So at the end of verse 36 Paul gave permission for an engaged couple to get married if they wanted to proceed. He said that the man would not be sinning if he decided to go through with it. The Greek word for sinning is the same one that we saw back in verse 28, where he said something very similar. He said, “If you do get married, you have not sinned, and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned.” 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 7:36 Paul said that an engaged man is not sinning if he gets married. If he wants to go through with the marriage, he is not breaking God’s law. He is free to pursue his desire. And I think the assumption is that his fiancée wants to get married as well. So even though Paul was recommending singleness through this section, he was careful to avoid commanding singleness. Instead he was very clear that most single people have God’s permission to get married. It’s true that human marriage is temporary and will not be part of the new heaven and the new earth. But during this time we should view it as a good gift from God that we can enjoy. Let’s close in prayer and thank God for the blessing of marriage.