

1 CORINTHIANS 7:37–38

May 14, 2023

Brad Norman

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 that an unmarried person can focus more attention on the things of the Lord than a married person can. Married people need to please their spouse, and that certainly pleases the Lord when it's done properly. But when married people are focused on pleasing their spouse, they can't do other things that please the Lord. A married person doesn't have the same flexibility to serve the Lord that a single person has. But Paul said very clearly that he was not putting a restraint on us. In other words, he was not giving single believers a command to remain unmarried. He just wanted us to be devoted to the Lord without distraction. Marriage brings many distractions into our lives, and 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.

Then in verse 36 Paul began a new paragraph, and we looked at this verse last week. But let's review it before we move on to some new material. Look at what Paul wrote in verse 36: “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 some Bible scholars think that Paul was talking about a man’s relationship to his virgin daughter in this verse. But most scholars today think that he was talking about a man’s relationship to his fiancée. That’s the interpretation found here in the Christian Standard Bible and in other Bible translations like the English Standard Version and the New International Version. And I think this view fits better in the context.

So in this verse Paul was talking about a possible scenario involving a man and his fiancée. He mentioned that the man thought he was acting inappropriately toward his fiancée. And then Paul explained what he meant by that statement. He said that she was getting beyond the usual age for marriage, which would have been the early teenage years in that culture. 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 simply referring to a situation in which a man was already engaged to a woman when she reached puberty.

So this man was probably considering the possibility of not going through with the marriage or at least putting the marriage on hold. But then he started thinking that this approach was rude to his fiancée. He began to believe that he was acting inappropriately toward her. After all, he was making her wait to enjoy the pleasures of marriage and start having children. And so this man felt that he should marry. There’s a word in the original Greek that has the idea of obligation. In other words, this man had a sense of obligation that he should marry his fiancée without delay. So if a man found himself in this situation, Paul said that he can do what he wants. He is free to follow his desire in this area. He and his fiancée can go ahead and get married. And Paul stated very clearly that they are not sinning. They are not breaking God’s law or doing anything wrong in his sight.

Now let’s move on to verse 37. We’re ready to cover some new material. Look at what Paul wrote in this verse: “But he who stands firm in his heart (who is under no compulsion, but has control over his own will) and has decided in his heart to keep her as his fiancée, will do well.” Notice that Paul started this verse with the word “but.” He was introducing a contrast with the previous verse. In verse 36 he was talking about an engaged man who wants to go through with the marriage to his fiancée. And Paul said that there’s nothing wrong with them getting married. But what if an engaged man decides not to go through with the marriage? That’s the situation Paul was addressing in verse 37.

So let’s look at how Paul described the engaged man in this verse. Paul made four statements about this man, and the first one is that he stands firm in his heart. The Greek word for stands is very common in the New Testament. It’s used over 150 times, but Paul wrote only 16 of them, and three of them are in this letter. We’re going to see this word again in chapter 10 and verse 12. There Paul said that “whoever thinks he stands must be careful not to fall.” Now Paul wasn’t speaking literally in that verse. He was talking about standing and falling in a figurative sense. He was saying that whoever thinks he’s strong spiritually needs to be careful not to give in to the temptation to sin. If we become arrogant about our spiritual state and think that we would never commit a particular sin, then we’re putting ourselves in a dangerous position. As Proverbs 16:18 says, “Pride comes before destruction, and an arrogant spirit before a fall.”

But we're also going to see the Greek word for stands in 1 Corinthians 15:1. In that verse Paul wrote, "Now I want to make clear for you, brothers and sisters, the gospel I preached to you, which you received, on which you have taken your stand." Now once again Paul was not talking about physical standing here. He was using this word spiritually, just like he was in chapter 10. He was saying that the Christians in Corinth believed the gospel and shared it with others. Their lives were centered on the gospel. Now certainly the Greek word for stands does refer to physical standing in Scripture, especially in the Gospels. But Paul tended to use this word figuratively, and I think that's what he was doing in our passage as well. In chapter 7 and verse 37 he was talking about an engaged man who stood firm in his heart.

So Paul made it clear here that he was not talking about physical standing. Instead he was talking about standing in the heart. Now we tend to think of the heart as a reference to our emotions. For example, people often say things like "I love you with all my heart." But in Scripture the heart usually points to the whole inner person. And there's often a special focus on thinking and reasoning. We've already seen the Greek word for heart twice in this letter, and in both places we saw an emphasis on the mind. In chapter 2 and verse 9 Paul wrote, "But as it is written, What no eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no human heart has conceived—God has prepared these things for those who love him." So Paul talked about the heart being able to conceive or think about things.

But Paul also used the Greek word for heart in chapter 4 and verse 5. Look at what Paul wrote here: "So don't judge anything prematurely, before the Lord comes, who will both bring to light what is hidden in darkness and reveal the intentions of the hearts. And then praise will come to each one from God." So in this verse Paul said that God will reveal the intentions of the hearts. Now we would say that we form our intentions in our minds. But Scripture often the word "heart" to refer the mind. And I think that's what Paul was doing in our passage as well. In chapter 7 and verse 37 he was talking about an engaged man who stood firm in his heart or his thoughts. Paul was talking about the mind and not the emotions.

But notice that Paul didn't just say that this man stood in his heart. He said that this man stood firm in his heart. The Greek word for firm is used only three times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote all of them. One of them is found in Colossians 1:23, where it's translated with the word "steadfast" in the Christian Standard Bible. Paul talked about the need for believers to "remain grounded and steadfast in the faith." But we're also going to see this Greek word again in 1 Corinthians. Look at what Paul wrote in chapter 15 and verse 58: "Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the Lord's work, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain." So once again our Greek term is translated with word "steadfast" in the Christian Standard Bible. Paul was telling us to be steadfast in our service to the Lord. In other words, we should not waver in our dedication to him.

So in 1 Corinthians 7:37 Paul was talking about an engaged man being steadfast in his mind and not wavering in his thoughts. Now obviously the context shows us that Paul was talking about singleness and marriage here. And in this verse he was referring to an engaged man who wanted to remain single. So when Paul talked about this man standing firm in his heart, he must have been saying that this man didn't waver in his decision to remain single. And this fact is emphasized by the tense that Paul chose for the verb here. The Greek verb for stand is in the perfect tense, and this tense refers to a completed action

with ongoing results. So this man made a decision to remain single, and the results were that he stood firm in that decision and didn't waver.

I'm sure you can all identify with this mindset. When we make decisions, we have to decide if we're going to follow through with them. In our family we've decided not to give another penny of our money to Disney because of how radically unbiblical that company has become. And we've been tested several times since we made that decision about whether we're going to stick with it. But each time we've been steadfast and haven't wavered. Now I'm not saying that it's wrong to change your mind about a decision. We all make poor decisions from time to time, and we shouldn't double down on bad decisions. We should admit when we're wrong and reverse our decision. But if we're convinced that we made a good decision, we should follow through with it. And that's what Paul was talking about here with an engaged man and his decision to remain single.

Now let's look at the second statement that Paul made about the engaged man in verse 37. He said that this man was "under no compulsion." In the Christian Standard Bible this statement and the next one are in parentheses, but no other major conservative translation uses parentheses here. This statement actually flows directly from the first one. The first statement has a main verb, but this second statement just has a participle, and this participle is subordinate to the main verb in the first statement. The English Standard Version is pretty literal here; it has the phrase "being under no necessity." The Greek word for compulsion or necessity is used 17 times in the New Testament. Paul wrote nine of them, and three of them are in this letter. We already saw the first one back in verse 26 of this chapter. That's where Paul talked about "the present distress," and our Greek word is translated "distress" there.

But this word can also have the idea of being compelled to do something. That's how Paul used the word later in chapter 9 and verse 16. Look at what he wrote there: "For if I preach the gospel, I have no reason to boast, because I am compelled to preach—and woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!" Paul said that he was compelled to preach the gospel, and that's because God commanded him to do it. So I think Paul was using the nuance of compulsion in chapter 7 and verse 37 as well. But he was saying that this engaged man was not under compulsion. And scholars have debated what Paul meant by this statement. Some of them think that he was talking about not having a desire for sexual intimacy. But it's hard to find much support for this view in the immediate context.

So I think the better view is that Paul was talking about being under compulsion by other people. And I believe we should be thinking primarily of this man's fiancée and her family. Paul was saying that she and her family were not pressuring him to go through with the marriage. They were not trying to compel him to get married to her. And so he didn't have any sense of obligation to rush into marriage. Now this doesn't mean that there weren't some important discussions that he needed to have with his fiancée and her family. I'm sure she would have wanted to talk to him about his decision to remain single. Maybe she tried to convince him at first to go through with the marriage. But the point is that eventually they came to an agreement, and she and her family were no longer trying to compel him to get married.

Now let's look at the third statement that Paul made about the engaged man in verse 37. He said that this

man had “control over his own will.” The Greek word for control is used about 100 times in the New Testament. Paul wrote 27 of them, and 10 of them are in this letter. We’re going to see it six times in chapter 9, where it refers to Paul’s rights as an apostle. Now usually this Greek word means “authority,” but a person in authority has control over others. So the word “control” is sometimes the best translation, and I think it works well here in verse 37. But Paul wasn’t talking about having control over people here. He was talking about this man having control over his own will.

Now we did see the Greek word for will back in chapter 1 and verse 1, where Paul said that he was “called as an apostle of Christ Jesus by God’s will.” But in the verse right before ours Paul used a Greek verb that comes from the same root. In chapter 7 and verse 36 Paul said that an engaged man can do what he wants. In other words, if he wants to get married, he can do so without sinning. And I think Paul was talking about the same desire in verse 37. He was referring to the desire to get married. But this time he said that the engaged man has control over his own will. So this man’s desire to get married did not overwhelm him and push him toward marriage. Instead this man was able to hold his desire for marriage in check. I do think that Paul was probably hinting at sexual desire here. A strong desire for sexual intimacy should lead a man to pursue marriage, but if he can control that desire, then singleness is a great option to consider.

Now let’s look at the fourth and final statement that Paul made about the engaged man in verse 37. He said that this man “has decided in his heart to keep her as his fiancée.” The Greek word for decided is used over 100 times in the New Testament, and normally it means “to judge.” For example, it’s used in John 7:24, where Jesus said, “Stop judging according to outward appearances; rather judge according to righteous judgment.” But this Greek verb can have other nuances as well. It can also have the idea of reaching a decision or coming to a conclusion. And we can see how this nuance is related to the concept of judging. When someone is judged, a decision is reached about whether that person is guilty of committing a crime. So we could say that judging someone is just a specific type of decision. Deciding is the more general nuance, while judging is the more specific nuance.

Now Paul used this Greek word 41 times in his letters, and 17 of them are found in this letter. In fact, we’ve already seen this word 11 times, and most of the time it means “to judge.” But that’s not the case in the first place where Paul used it. In chapter 2 and verse 2 Paul said, “I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” So in this verse it seems obvious that Paul was using the more general nuance of deciding. He was saying that he made a decision to focus on preaching about the crucifixion of Jesus when he was in Corinth. This wasn’t something that just happened by accident. He made a very deliberate decision in advance about it.

And I think Paul was using the same nuance in chapter 7 and verse 37 as well. He was saying that this engaged man made a deliberate decision in advance to remain single. And Paul emphasized this decision by using the Greek perfect tense once again, just like he did in the first statement. As we discussed earlier, the Greek perfect tense emphasizes completed action with ongoing results. So Paul was saying that the engaged man already made a decision about remaining single. But that decision had an ongoing effect in his life. He continued to stand by that decision. As Paul said in the first statement, this man stood firm in

his heart. And Paul even repeated the phrase “in his heart” here in the fourth statement. So once again he was emphasizing that this man made a firm decision in his mind.

But let’s look more carefully at this decision that the engaged man made. The Christian Standard Bible is actually missing two words here, but they’re found in the Legacy Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible. Both of these translations say that this man “has decided this in his own heart.” The Christian Standard Bible doesn’t have the words “this” or “own.” The Greek word for own is the same one that we just saw in the third statement, where Paul said that the engaged man “has control over his own will.” So Paul was emphasizing the personal nature of this man’s decision. And the word “this” just points forward to the rest of this fourth statement. But it adds more emphasis to this statement because it’s drawing extra attention to the end of the statement.

So Paul ends this statement by saying that this man decided “to keep her as his fiancée.” But this phrase is not a very literal translation. The New American Standard Bible says that the man decided “to keep his own virgin.” The Greek word for virgin is the same one that we’ve already seen four times in verses 25–36. It just refers to a woman who hasn’t experienced sexual relations. The Greek word for keep is used 70 times in the New Testament, but Paul only used it eight times, and this is the only place where he used it in 1 Corinthians. Now this word can refer to the idea of guarding, but it can also mean “to continue doing something.” And that seems to be the nuance here. Paul was saying that this engaged man decided to continue being engaged instead of getting married.

Now some Bible scholars think that Paul was talking about terminating the engagement here. And this interpretation is reflected in the New International Version, which says that this man “made up his mind not to marry the virgin.” But I don’t know of another major conservative Bible translation that takes this interpretation. It’s just not a natural way to understand the Greek text. And it doesn’t fit with the phrase that literally means “his own virgin.” After all, if this man was terminating his engagement, then this woman didn’t belong to him anymore! So I don’t think that Paul was encouraging engaged men to divorce their fiancées. That’s what would have been required, because the bond of engagement in that culture was just as strong as the bond of marriage. Instead I think Paul was saying that the engaged man was just delaying his marriage. He was still planning to go through with it, but not right away.

Now we should be careful in applying this statement to our lives today. In our culture engagement is treated differently than it was during biblical times. Now I believe that there are a lot of advantages to having a more binding engagement. I think most people treat engagement too lightly today. Engagements often get broken without a good reason. So I certainly wish that people would treat engagement more seriously, but I don’t think it’s a matter of right and wrong. Scripture doesn’t teach that we’re in sin if we don’t have a strong view of engagement. This is just a wisdom issue, and so I don’t believe that there’s anything inherently wrong with terminating an engagement. But I would strongly recommend that couples don’t get engaged lightly and that they don’t end an engagement lightly either.

So we’ve looked at these four statements that Paul made about the engaged man in verse 37. And Paul ended this verse by saying that this man “will do well.” In other words, he was saying that this man was

making a good decision to remain single. The Greek word for well here is an adverb that comes from the same root as the Greek adjective that means “good.” We saw this adjective back in verse 26, where Paul said that “it is good for a man to remain as he is.” Now unfortunately the New International Version misinterprets this phrase at the end of verse 37. It says that this man “does the right thing.” But Paul wasn’t talking about right and wrong here. He was just saying that this man was making a wise decision about his immediate future.

Now let’s finish by looking at verse 38. Look at what Paul wrote here: “So then he who marries his fiancée does well, but he who does not marry will do better.” Paul started this verse with the phrase “so then,” which introduces a conclusion to what Paul was saying in verses 36–37. He was wrapping up his discussion about the engaged man and giving us a summary about his two options for moving forward. So there are two statements here; the first one summarizes verse 36, and the second one summarizes verse 37. And in both verses Paul used the same Greek word for marry. This word is used only seven times in the New Testament, and the other five are all in the Gospels. And in the Gospels this word always refers to giving someone away in marriage. For example, in Matthew 22:30 Jesus said, “For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage but are like angels in heaven.”

So in this verse there are two Greek words that refer to marriage. The first one is more common and refers to getting married. But the second one is more rare and usually refers to giving someone away in marriage. In other words, this second word refers to the role of the woman’s father. He’s the one who gives her away in marriage, and that’s a practice that continues today. So this is the main reason that some Bible scholars think that Paul was talking about a woman’s father in 1 Corinthians 7 and not her fiancé. And this approach can be found in the Legacy Standard Bible. But this view just doesn’t fit the context of this passage, and so most Bible scholars think that Paul was talking about getting married and not giving someone away in marriage. We don’t have any other examples of this interpretation for the Greek word, but scholars haven’t been able to find this word outside the New Testament, and so we shouldn’t conclude that it can’t have this meaning. Most Bible translations agree with the Christian Standard Bible here.

So in the beginning of verse 38 Paul talked about a man who marries his fiancée or literally his virgin, and he said that this man does well. The Greek word for well is the same one that we just saw at the end of verse 37. And so Paul was saying that both options are good! An engaged man does well whether he waits to get married or whether he gets married right away, as long as he fits the criteria that Paul laid out for the decision he makes. But at the end of verse 38 Paul said that man who does not marry will do even better. So both of these decisions are good, but Paul believed that remaining single was the superior choice. He was encouraging engaged men to remain single for a while in light of the current distress that they were experiencing.

Now the Christian Standard Bible communicates a contrast between these two choices by giving us the word “but” in the middle of the verse. But the Greek word here normally just means “and,” which is the word that we see in the English Standard Bible, the Legacy Standard Bible, the New American Standard Bible. Paul was not implying that these decisions were polar opposites. They were both good decisions, and one of them was a little better in Paul’s inspired opinion. So singleness should not be viewed as a

status to get out of as soon as possible. Christians who remain single for a while are often looked down on. People often wonder what's wrong with them. But singleness provides a wonderful opportunity to serve the Lord in a variety of ways. We should not view single believers as second-class citizens in the church. We should be thankful for them and encourage them to use their singleness for God's glory. Let's close in prayer.