

1 CORINTHIANS 7:39

May 21, 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 verses 36–38 Paul turned his attention to an engaged couple. In verse 36 he talked about an engaged man who wanted to go forward with the marriage. He thought that he would be acting inappropriately toward his fiancée if he made her wait to get married. After all, she was getting beyond the usual age

for marriage. So Paul said that they could go ahead and get married. It was not a sin for them to do that. But then in verse 37 Paul talked about an engaged man who wanted to wait for a while before getting married. He wasn't under compulsion from his fiancée and her family to get married right away. And he was able to control his desire to get married. So Paul said that this man would do well to remain single. In other words, this man was making a wise decision not to get married right away.

Now I don't think that Paul was in favor of a man terminating his engagement. During ancient times a divorce would have been required in that situation. And Scripture only allows for divorce in very limited circumstances. But Paul obviously had no problem with an engaged couple delaying their marriage, especially in light of the present distress that they were experiencing at that point in time. So Paul taught that an engaged couple could get married as soon as they were ready, or they could choose to wait for a while to get married. Either way they were pursuing a good option. But in verse 38 Paul gave his opinion that it was better for them to remain single for a while. So 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.

Now let's move on to 1 Corinthians 7:39. We're ready to cover some new material. Look at what Paul wrote in this verse: "A wife is bound as long as her husband is living. But if her husband dies, she is free to be married to anyone she wants—only in the Lord." So in this verse Paul shifted his focus from men back to women. In verses 36–38 his focus was on men, and so it was natural for him to focus on women in verses 39–40. This is a pattern that we've seen throughout this chapter. Paul shifted back and forth between men and women so that he maintained a careful balance. And he ended this chapter by focusing on women, though of course what he said here certainly has application for men as well.

Now in these closing verses it seems like Paul wasn't talking about virgins anymore. Instead he was talking about a wife or a woman who was married. But I think he was just trying to help virgins learn about what to expect if they decided to get married. He wanted them to know what they would be getting into. That way they could make a wise and well-informed decision about remaining single or getting married. So Paul started verse 39 by saying that "a wife is bound as long as her husband is living." The Greek word here for bound is used a total of 43 times in the New Testament, but Paul wrote only five of them. Now usually this word just refers to being confined by restraints. For example, in Acts 21:33 when Paul was in Jerusalem, we're told that "the commander approached, took him into custody, and ordered him to be bound with chains."

But this Greek word can also refer to being constrained by law and duty. That's how Paul used it in Romans 7:2. There he said that "a married woman is legally bound to her husband while he lives." That statement is very similar to what Paul said here in 1 Corinthians 7:39. In both places he was talking about being bound in marriage. Now what does it mean to be bound in marriage? It just means that husbands and wives have certain duties to each other. Scripture teaches that marriage is a covenant or agreement to be lifelong companions. So a husband and wife need to live together and show love to each other in a variety of ways. That includes sexual intimacy, which they're not allowed to share with anyone else. Scripture also teaches that a husband is to lead his wife and that a wife is to submit to her husband.

So being bound in marriage is much better than being bound in chains! It's a very special relationship for a man and a woman to be bound in marriage. Now this Greek word for bound in verse 39 is a verb in the perfect tense. And the perfect tense refers to a completed action with ongoing results. So a wife was bound in marriage to her husband in the past, but her marriage has ongoing results in her life. She continues to be bound in marriage to him as long as he is living. Now this doesn't mean that a man and a woman are still bound if they get divorced. A marriage can be terminated by either death or divorce. Back in verse 15 Paul said that if an unbeliever decides to leave a marriage with a believer, that believer is no longer bound. The Greek word for bound there is not the same one that we have here, but these two words are basically synonymous in this chapter.

So God permits the divorce of a mixed marriage if the unbeliever leaves. But in Matthew 19:9 Jesus taught that divorce is also permitted if a spouse commits unrepentant sexual immorality. So in both cases the man and the woman are no longer bound after the divorce. But Paul wasn't addressing the subject of divorce in 1 Corinthians 7:39. He was just assuming that a husband and wife would remain married until one of them died. And that's certainly the ideal situation. After all, divorce is always a result of sin. Something has gone wrong if a marriage ends in divorce. So the goal should be for a husband and wife to stay married until one of them dies. And in this verse Paul was speaking from the woman's perspective. He said that a wife is bound as long as her husband is living.

Then Paul introduced a contrast with the word "but." In the second half of the verse he said, "But if her husband dies, she is free to be married to anyone she wants—only in the Lord." So in the first half of verse 39 Paul talked about what's true if a woman's husband is still alive. But in the second half of the verse he talked about what's true if her husband dies. The Greek word for dies literally means "to sleep." It's used 18 times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote nine of them. Three of them are in 1 Thessalonians, but all the other six are here in 1 Corinthians. Now sometimes this word is used literally to refer to sleep. For example, Acts 12:6 says that Peter "was sleeping between two soldiers" while he was in prison. That was right before an angel appeared and set him free.

But usually this Greek word is used figuratively to refer to death. That's how Jesus used the word in John 11:11. He told his disciples, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I'm on my way to wake him up." But in verse 12 his disciples misunderstood him. They said, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will get well." Then verses 13–14 say, "Jesus, however, was speaking about his death, but they thought he was speaking about natural sleep. So Jesus told them plainly, 'Lazarus has died.'" So here's a very clear example of the word "sleep" being used figuratively to refer to death. And Paul followed the example of Jesus in this area. He always used the Greek word for sleep to refer to death. Look at what he said in chapter 11 and verses 29–30: "For whoever eats and drinks without recognizing the body, eats and drinks judgment on himself. This is why many are sick and ill among you, and many have fallen asleep."

In this passage Paul was of course talking about the Lord's Supper. And he warned the Corinthian believers that their failure to examine themselves and turn from their sin of creating divisions in the church was the reason that some of them were sick or even dead. Now this doesn't mean that all sickness and death is a direct result of sin. But sometimes that's certainly the case. We know from Acts 5 that God

killed Ananias and Sapphira when they lied about the money they gave to the apostles. They said that they sold a piece of property and gave all the money to the apostles, but they only gave some of the money. There was nothing wrong with giving only some of the money, but the problem was that they lied about it. And God hates lying, so on this occasion he decided to put people to death immediately for lying. And later he put some people to death for clinging to sin when they celebrated the Lord's Supper.

Now let's look at 1 Corinthians 15:6. In verse 5 Paul said that after Jesus rose from the dead, he appeared to Cephas or Peter and then to the twelve disciples. But in verse 6 Paul said, "Then he appeared to over five hundred brothers and sisters at one time; most of them are still alive, but some have fallen asleep." Now this event had taken place only about 20 years earlier. But some of the believers who saw Jesus after his resurrection had died during that time. And Paul described them as those who had fallen asleep in contrast with those who were still alive. So it's very clear from this contrast that Paul was talking about sleep figuratively as a reference to death.

Now let's look at 1 Corinthians 15:17–18. Paul wrote, "And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins. Those, then, who have fallen asleep in Christ have also perished." In these verses Paul was talking about the importance of Christ's resurrection. If Jesus is still dead, then we can't be saved from our sins. And every dead believer has perished, which is a reference to eternal punishment. But thankfully that's not what has happened. Look at verse 20: "But as it is, Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep." So Paul was supremely confident that Jesus had been raised from the dead. He saw Jesus alive after his death, and so did hundreds of other people. And so Paul knew that there was hope for dead believers. They too would rise from the dead one day. That's why Paul referred to Jesus as the firstfruits. He was the first to be raised from the dead never to die again, and we're going to follow suit.

Now look at 1 Corinthians 15:51–52. In these verses Paul wrote, "Listen, I am telling you a mystery: We will not all fall asleep, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we will be changed." So in these verses Paul was talking about the return of Jesus. He was pointing out that some believers will still be alive when Jesus comes back. That's why he said that "we will not all fall asleep." But then he said that "we will all be changed." Whether we're dead or alive when Jesus returns, we're going to receive new bodies that are like his glorious body.

Now let's look at the other letter where Paul used the word "sleep" to refer to death. Turn to 1 Thessalonians 4, and let's look at verses 13–15: "We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, concerning those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve like the rest, who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, in the same way, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. For we say this to you by a word from the Lord: We who are still alive at the Lord's coming will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep." So in these three verses Paul used the Greek word for sleep three times, and each time he was talking about believers who had died. He didn't want the believers who were alive to grieve for them like those who had no hope. Paul said that God is going to bring dead believers with Jesus.

Now Paul's language is a little cryptic at this point, but in verses 16–18 he clarified what he meant. Look at what he wrote on those verses: “For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the archangel's voice, and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are still alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore encourage one another with these words.” So in this passage Paul clarified that when he talked about those who had fallen asleep earlier, he was referring to the dead in Christ. And he said that these people are going to rise from the dead when Jesus returns. But believers who are still alive at that time won't be left out. They will get to meet Jesus in the air after the dead in Christ rise. And then we'll all be with Jesus forever.

So in both 1 Corinthians 15 and 1 Thessalonians 4 Paul described dead believers as those who have fallen asleep. And I think it's obvious why he did that. He was stressing that they're not going to stay dead! One day they're going to rise from the dead. That's why Jesus spoke said that Lazarus was asleep, and that's why Paul used this language as well. So as Christians we should think about death as being similar to sleep. Going to sleep usually isn't unpleasant, because we know that we're going to wake up and feel refreshed. And we can have the same confidence when we die. We know that we're going to rise from the dead to a better life. We'll have new bodies that won't be subject to pain or death anymore.

So let's return to 1 Corinthians 7:39 and remind ourselves of what Paul was talking about here. He was talking about a wife whose husband dies. And this was a pretty normal experience during ancient times. Husbands were usually older than their wives, and men had a shorter life expectancy anyway. So that was one of the challenging things about being married, and it's still true today. The death of a spouse is something that every married person needs to be prepared for, and women still tend to face it more often than men. Paul wanted female virgins to be ready for this possibility if they decided to get married. But he also slipped in a word of hope here. He talked about death as sleep to encourage wives that they would see their husbands again, assuming that their husbands were believers.

So if a wife's husband died, Paul said here in verse 39 that she was free. The Greek word for free is used 23 times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote 16 of them. Six of these occurrences are in our letter, and we've already see the first two back in verses 21–22 of this chapter. Look at what Paul wrote in these verses: “Were you called while a slave? Don't let it concern you. But if you can become free, by all means take the opportunity. For he who is called by the Lord as a slave is the Lord's freedman. Likewise he who is called as a free man is Christ's slave.” In these verses Paul was making a contrast between being a slave and being free. So the word “free” sometimes refers to the opposite of being a slave, and that's often how Paul used this word.

But that's not how Paul was using the word “free” in verse 39. Instead he was referring to the opposite of being married. Instead of being bound in marriage, a widow is free. She's free from the obligations that come with being married. She no longer has a husband to love and submit to. But the word “free” also indicates that she has the option of entering into a new marriage. Paul said here that “she is free to be married to anyone she wants.” The Greek word for married just refers to a man and a woman becoming husband and wife. It's used 28 times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote 12 of them. He used this word

three times in 1 Timothy, but the other nine occurrences are here in 1 Corinthians. And all of them are found right here in chapter 7. We've already seen the first eight of them, and now we're looking at the ninth and final one.

So Paul made it clear that a widow is permitted by God to get remarried. Now Paul was not commanding widows to get remarried here. He came close to doing that in 1 Timothy 5:14. In that verse he was talking about widows, and he said, "I want younger women to marry, have children, manage their households, and give the adversary no opportunity to accuse us." So it was Paul's strong desire for younger widows to get remarried, but he still didn't give a command about it. And here in 1 Corinthians 7:39 he made it clear that remarriage for widows is simply an option that's available for them to consider. They're free to get remarried if they want to, but they have the option of remaining single as well.

Now Paul could have ended his statement at this point, but I'm glad that he kept going, because he gave us some very important details. He answered an important question that widows during biblical times would have asked. They would have been wondering, "Do I have a choice about the person I get married to?" Now that question may seem silly to us in modern times. But during Old Testament times there was a common practice called levirate marriage. It was practiced by many cultures, and it was commanded in Deuteronomy 25. If an Israelite man died without having a son, then his widow would marry his next youngest brother, and he would raise up a son in his older brother's name. That way his family line could continue instead of being blotted out.

So during Old Testament times there was a chance that an Israelite widow wouldn't get to choose her next husband. But Paul was basically saying here in 1 Corinthians 7:39 that believers were not under the law of levirate marriage. After all, Paul taught elsewhere that believers are not under the Old Testament law. In Romans 10:4 he said that "Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes." Now this doesn't mean that we're not under any law. In the Great Commission Jesus told his disciples to teach their disciples to obey everything he commanded them. So we are under the law of Christ, and that's exactly what Paul said about himself in 1 Corinthians 9:21. He said, "I am not without God's law but under the law of Christ."

So believers need to obey the commands of Jesus, and there is definitely some overlap between his commands and the Old Testament commands. For example, nine of the Ten Commandments are repeated in the New Testament. But we don't have to obey the fourth commandment about keeping the Sabbath Day. We also don't have to obey the food laws in the Old Testament, because in Mark 7:19 Jesus declared all foods clean. And the same thing is true about levirate marriage. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 7:39 that a widow can get married to anyone she wants. The Greek word for wants is the same one that we just saw in verse 36. In that verse Paul said that an engaged man can do what he wants. In other words, he can go ahead and get married to his fiancée. And in verse 39 Paul was saying basically the same thing about a widow. She can do what she wants as well and get married to anyone she desires.

So no one should tell a widow whom she needs to marry. She shouldn't let anyone force her to marry someone she doesn't want to. She doesn't even have to ask her father for permission if he's still alive. He

would have arranged her first marriage, but Paul said that she could arrange her second marriage. Now this doesn't mean that there are absolutely no restrictions on the person a widow can marry. For Paul it went without saying she needs to marry an eligible single man. In other words, he can't be a close relative, or they would be committing incest. And he also can't be divorced without biblical grounds. In that case he needs to remain single and try to get reconciled with his ex-wife until she's remarried or dead.

So Paul didn't need to give those obvious qualifications about the man a widow could get married to. But he did give one qualification at the end of verse 39. He said that she could marry "only in the Lord." We've already seen the word "Lord" four times in this section. We saw it in verses 25, 32, and 34–35, and in each case it's referring to Jesus. Paul was stressing that Jesus is our master, and we must submit to him and obey him. But what did Paul mean when he said that a widow is to marry "only in the Lord"? Some Bible scholars think that a widow is simply to approach her second marriage with a commitment to the Lord. But most scholars conclude that a widow is only allowed to marry a fellow believer.

And this interpretation is supported in Romans 16:11. In that verse Paul said, "Greet Herodion, my fellow Jew. Greet those who belong to the household of Narcissus who are in the Lord." So in this verse the phrase "in the Lord" clearly refers to people who are Christians. And I think it's pretty clear that Paul was using this phrase in the same way in 1 Corinthians 7:39. That's why the New International Version says that "he must belong to the Lord." And I think the same thing is true for a widower as well. If the wife of a Christian man dies, he is only allowed to get remarried to an eligible Christian woman. In fact, I think we can apply this principle to our first marriage as well. No believer should ever get married to an unbeliever. In 2 Corinthians 6:14 Paul said that we should not "become partners with those who do not believe," and marriage is the closest human partnership there is.

Now 1 Corinthians 7:39 has huge ramifications for how we make decisions. So many believers think that God is going to tell them in some subjective way whom specifically they should get married to. But Paul said that we're free to get married to anyone we want! The principle here is that we have freedom to choose according to our desires when Scripture does not give us a command that applies directly to our situation. And this principle doesn't just apply to marriage. It applies to a variety of other big decisions like where we live and what we do for work. We shouldn't expect God to tell us what to do in those situations. Instead we can do whatever we want to do, as long as we're striving to be wise and living in obedience to God's revealed Word. Let's close in prayer and thank God for this incredible freedom.