

# 1 CORINTHIANS 7:40

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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 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.

Then in verse 39 Paul shifted his focus from men back to women. He said that "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 a husband and wife are bound in marriage until one of them dies. Now marriages can also end in divorce, but God only permits divorce under very limited circumstances. And Paul wasn't focused on that issue here. He was just assuming the ideal situation here. So in the first half of the verse Paul talked about what's true if a woman's husband is still alive. But in the second half of the verse he gave us a contrast. He talked about what's true if a woman's 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 if a wife's husband dies, Paul said here in verse 39 that she is free. In other words, she is no longer bound in marriage. Instead she is free from the obligations that come with being married. But she is also free to enter into a new marriage. Paul said that "she is free to be married to anyone she wants." So Paul made it clear that remarriage is an option that's available to widows. It's not something that they have to do, but it's something that they can consider doing. And if they decide to get remarried, they have a choice about the person they get married to. The Old Testament law of levirate marriage is not binding on believers in the church age. So a widow 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. She can get married to anyone she desires.

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 can get married to. But he did give one qualification at the end of verse 39. He said that a widow can marry "only in the

Lord.” In other words, she is only allowed to marry a fellow believer. And I think this restriction applies to both widows and widowers, and I believe it also applies to first marriages. No believer should ever get married to an unbeliever.

So this verse has huge ramifications for how we make decisions. 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 exactly 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.

Now let’s look at 1 Corinthians 7:40. We’re ready to cover some new material and finish this chapter. Look at what Paul wrote in this verse: “But she is happier if she remains as she is, in my opinion. And I think that I also have the Spirit of God.” This verse starts with the word “but,” which introduces a contrast. In verse 39 Paul said that a widow has the freedom to get remarried. But here in verse 40 Paul continued to recommend singleness as he did throughout this chapter. He said that “she is happier if she remains as she is.” The Greek word for remains is one of the key words in this chapter. It’s used eight times in this letter, and five of them are right here in chapter 7. Most recently we saw it in verse 24, where Paul said, “Brothers and sisters, each person is to remain with God in the situation in which he was called.” And in verse 20 Paul said something very similar: “Let each of you remain in the situation in which he was called.”

So in those two verses Paul was giving the general principle that we should stay in the marital status that we were in when we got saved. If we’re married, we should try to stay married, and if we’re single, we should consider remaining single. But earlier in the chapter Paul was focused squarely on singleness. In verse 8 he wrote, “I say to the unmarried and to widows: It is good for them if they remain as I am.” Then in verse 11 he said that if a wife divorces her husband without biblical grounds, “she must remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband.” And in verse 40 Paul was also talking about remaining single. He said that a widow “is happier if she remains as she is.” The Greek word translated “as she is” normally means “in this way,” and it’s clearly a reference to the widow’s marital status. So Paul was just saying that he thought she would be happier if she remained single.

The Greek word for happier is used 50 times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote seven of them. But the word is used only here in this letter. Now this word is normally translated with the word “blessed” in most English Bible versions. That’s the way it’s translated in the beatitudes, which are recorded in the beginning of Matthew 5. Each beatitude starts with the word “blessed,” and then we’re told who is blessed and why. For example, Matthew 5:3 says, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for the kingdom of heaven is theirs.” And verse 4 says, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.” So this word normally refers to a privileged recipient of divine favor. In other words, a blessed person is someone who has received favor from God.

But sometimes the Greek word for blessed just refers to the general idea of happiness, and I think that's the idea here in 1 Corinthians 7:40. Most of the major conservative Bible translations have the word "happier," including the Christian Standard Bible, the English Standard Version, the Legacy Standard Bible, the New American Standard Bible, the NET Bible, and the New International Version. In fact, I didn't see a single translation that has the word "blessed" here. And I don't think it's too difficult to see why translators have avoided that word here. It would imply that single believers are more favored by God than married believers. But I don't see anything in this context or anywhere else in Scripture to support that conclusion. Paul's concerns in this passage are more practical in nature.

So what did Paul mean when he said that a widow is happier if she remains single than if she gets remarried? There's no elaboration in this verse about what he meant. And so we need to rely on the context to help us interpret this statement. I think we should understand it primarily in light of what he said in verse 26. The first reason that he gave for remaining single in this section was the present distress, which is probably a reference to a severe famine in the Roman Empire. So Paul thought that getting married during this time would make life difficult for a new couple. They would be starting their marriage during challenging times, and so it's easy to see why Paul would think that they'd be happier if they remained single at least temporarily instead of getting married.

But Paul also could have been thinking about what he said in verses 32–35. In that paragraph he said that a single person is concerned about the things of the Lord and that a married person is concerned about the things of the world. So perhaps Paul was saying that we'll be happier if we remain single and have the flexibility to serve the Lord in a variety of ways. Paul certainly understood from experience how much joy there is in serving the Lord as a single person. So whatever Paul meant by the word "happier" in verse 40, I think an important lesson to learn here is that the grass isn't always greener on the other side of the fence. Many single people are unhappy and think that getting married will make them happy. But some people end up being even more unhappy after they get married! Marriage is not all sunshine and roses; there are lots of ups and downs. It takes hard work from both spouses to have a good marriage!

So single believers shouldn't assume that getting married will make them happier. They might be happier, but they might not. It's important for us to learn to be content in whatever circumstances we find ourselves. We shouldn't think that changing our circumstances will always make us happier. A lot of people have moved out of California thinking that they would be happier, but that hasn't always happened. Many people who used to attend our church haven't been able to find a good church in their new location. Now many people certainly are happier after their circumstances change, and many people are happier after they get married. I don't think Paul was saying that everyone would be happier as a single person than a married person, even during that time of distress. He was just making a general statement that applied primarily to that situation.

And we need to remember that Paul was just giving his opinion throughout this section. And he emphasized that point about widows here in verse 40. He said, "But she is happier if she remains as she is, in my opinion." The Greek word for opinion is used nine times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote five of them. He used it two other times in this letter, and we've already seen both of them. The first one was

back in chapter 1 and verse 10. Look at what Paul said in that verse: “Now I urge you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree in what you say, that there be no divisions among you, and that you be united with the same understanding and the same conviction.” The word “conviction” at the very end of the verse comes from the same Greek word that Paul used in chapter 7 and verse 40.

Now when we studied chapter 1 and verse 10, I concluded that Paul was not actually talking about our convictions there. A conviction is a firmly held opinion, and I really doubt that Paul wanted or expected the Corinthian believers to have the same opinions about everything. It's fine for Christians to have different opinions about things like food, art, and music. But our Greek word can also have the idea of purpose. That's actually the word used in the NET Bible and the New Living Translation. And this nuance makes more sense in that verse. Paul certainly wanted all believers to have the same purpose in life. We should all be focused on glorifying God and pleasing him. He was expecting unity, not uniformity.

Then the other place where Paul used this Greek word in 1 Corinthians is chapter 7 and verse 25. In that verse he wrote, “Now about virgins: I have no command from the Lord, but I do give an opinion as one who by the Lord's mercy is faithful.” In this verse our Greek word is translated with the word “opinion.” And I agree with this interpretation. I don't think that Paul was talking about the idea of purpose. The nuance of conviction makes better sense here. Paul had a strong opinion about virgins, and he wanted to share that opinion with his readers. Now he easily could have said that he was going to give us some commands about virgins. After all, he was an apostle who represented Jesus and carried his authority. Instead he chose to give his opinion. But we need to remember that his opinion was still inspired by God. We should not just dismiss his opinion and ignore it. God preserved it for us in Scripture so that we could consider it carefully.

And now we're seeing Paul make another reference to his opinion in verse 40. I think it's clear that we have the same nuance in this verse that we saw in verse 25. Paul opened this section by emphasizing that he was giving his opinion, and he also emphasized that point as he closed this section. This word essentially functions as a set of bookends for this section on virgins in verses 25–40. So we need to make sure that we maintain a proper balance on singleness and marriage. Paul was not commanding singleness here in this section. He was just saying that it's a good option to consider. A single believer should not just rush into marriage. It would be wiser to think carefully about the possibility of remaining single before deciding whether to get married. Both singleness and marriage are good gifts from God that we should learn to appreciate.

But we know that some of the Christians in Corinth didn't think very highly of Paul. There were factions in the Corinthian church, and chapter 1 tells us that they centered on Paul, Peter, and Apollos. So there were some people in that church who liked Paul, but others clearly did not. And so Paul ended this section in verse 40 by defending himself. But he wasn't doing that out of pride or arrogance. He wasn't trying to boost his ego and his self-esteem. He just wanted to make sure that all the Corinthian believers considered his words here. He didn't want them to dismiss his opinion on singleness and marriage out of hand. He wanted them to think carefully about what he was saying.

So at the end of verse 40 Paul said, “And I think that I also have the Spirit of God.” The word “and” just introduces an additional statement here. Paul was adding one last thought to bring this section to a conclusion. And he started this final sentence with the phrase “I think.” The Greek verb for think is used 62 times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote 18 of them. Exactly half of them are found in this letter, and we’ve already saw the first two. In chapter 3 and verse 18 Paul said, “If anyone among you thinks he is wise in this age, let him become a fool so that he can become wise.” So in this verse our verb has the nuance of holding an opinion. Paul was talking about people who thought that they had worldly wisdom. Their opinion was accurate, but they needed to let go of that worldly wisdom so they could become wise in God’s eyes.

Then we saw the Greek verb for think again in chapter 4. In verse 9 Paul wrote, “For I think God has displayed us, the apostles, in last place, like men condemned to die: We have become a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to people.” So in this verse Paul was talking about his own opinion. He was accurately commenting on the situation that he and his fellow apostles were in. And in chapter 7 and verse 40 Paul once again gave his opinion about himself. He thought that he also had the Spirit of God. Now we would have expected him to appeal to his apostleship here. That should have gotten people to wake up and pay attention to his words! But instead he took a more modest approach. He just said that he had the Spirit of God.

Now the Greek word for Spirit is used a whopping 40 times in this letter, and we’ve already seen 18 of them. Sometimes this word refers to the immaterial part of a person. We just saw this nuance back in verse 34 of this chapter, where Paul talked about a virgin being “holy both in body and in spirit.” But in 10 of the 18 occurrences of this word that we’ve seen, the Christian Standard Bible capitalizes the word “spirit” to show that it’s probably referring to the Holy Spirit or the third person in the Trinity. And one of the things that Paul has emphasized about the Holy Spirit is that he lives inside believers. Look at what Paul wrote in chapter 2 and verse 12: “Now we have not received the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who comes from God, so that we may understand what has been freely given to us by God.”

Now look at chapter 3 and verse 16: “Don’t you yourselves know that you are God’s temple and that the Spirit of God lives in you?” Finally, look at chapter 6 and verses 19–20: “Don’t you know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought at a price. So glorify God with your body.” So we’ve already seen three times in this letter that Christians have the Holy Spirit living in them. And so it’s no surprise that Paul would think he had the Spirit of God. He was just saying something that’s true about every believer! I don’t think anyone in the Corinthian church would have doubted the fact that Paul was a Christian.

But some of these believers needed to think about the logic of that fact. If Paul was a Christian, then he also had the Spirit of God just like they did. That’s why Paul used the word “also” here. He wasn’t making any kind of extravagant claim about himself. He just wanted these people to think the same way about him that they thought about themselves. And I love Paul’s approach here, because he was leaving room for us to develop our own opinions. But we shouldn’t think that our opinions are inherently better than the opinions of any other Christian. We all have the Holy Spirit living in us, and so every believer has the

capacity to offer valuable advice. In fact, we should be seeking wise counsel from our fellow believers instead of just relying on our own opinions.

This is a theme that we see repeatedly in the book of Proverbs. Chapter 12 and verse 15 says, “A fool’s way is right in his own eyes, but whoever listens to counsel is wise.” Chapter 13 and verse 10 says, “Arrogance leads to nothing but strife, but wisdom is gained by those who take advice.” Chapter 15 and verse 22 says, “Plans fail when there is no counsel, but with many advisers they succeed.” Finally, chapter 19 and verse 20 says, “Listen to counsel and receive instruction so that you may be wise later in life.” So whenever we face major decisions in life, we should ask others for their advice. Now sometimes we can get helpful counsel from unbelievers. But counsel from believers is inherently more valuable because the Spirit lives in us. This doesn’t mean that our opinions are inspired like Paul’s opinion was in 1 Corinthians 7. But our opinions should be generally reliable because the Spirit is working in us and helping us to grow in knowledge and holiness.

So we shouldn’t be afraid to ask other Christians for advice about important decisions that we’re facing. And we shouldn’t be afraid to offer our opinion about various issues when we’re interacting with fellow believers. Now we should be careful not to be divisive in the way that we express our opinions. For example, I advise people not to drink any alcoholic beverages. I think that it’s a good protection against drunkenness, and it saves money as well. But I don’t have a command from Scripture to support my view, and so I don’t try to force my opinion on other believers. When we can give people a command from Scripture that applies directly to their situation, then we should take a stronger approach and call on them to obey the Lord. But many issues in life are not that black and white. And so we should learn to give people advice in those areas without being too forceful. Let’s close in prayer and ask for God’s help to do that.