

1 CORINTHIANS 7:8

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Turn in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 7. In this chapter Paul began responding to a letter from the Corinthian believers. He was addressing a variety of topics that they asked him about. And the first topic that he focused on was the theme of marriage in the first 24 verses of chapter 7. In verse 1 he started by quoting the Corinthian believers. Some of them thought that it was good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman. So these people were advocating abstinence from sexual relations. But in verse 2 Paul responded by saying that a husband and wife must have sexual relations with each other. Otherwise they will have a harder time avoiding sexual immorality. So he made it clear that abstinence is not allowed for married people.

And in verse 3 Paul basically repeated himself for emphasis. He said that a husband and a wife need to fulfill their marital duty to each other. The phrase “marital duty” comes from a Greek word that usually refers to a financial obligation. So just like we have a duty to pay taxes to the government, we also have a duty if we’re married to give sexual intimacy to our spouse. Then in verse 4 Paul continued to talk about our marital duties, but this time he switched to the idea of having authority. He said that a husband and wife have authority over each other’s body in the area of sexuality. We know from Scripture that a wife needs to submit to her husband, but in this one area a husband also needs to submit to his wife. She has exclusive rights to her husband’s sexuality.

Then in verse 5 Paul commanded the Corinthian believers to stop depriving their spouses of sexual intimacy. Just like business owners shouldn’t withhold payment from their workers, so also a husband and wife shouldn’t withhold sexual intimacy from each other. But Paul did grant one exception to this rule, and he listed three conditions for it. First he said that a husband and wife need to agree about abstaining. They shouldn’t proceed unless there’s mutual consent without any arm-twisting. Then he said that they should abstain for a specific length of time. The idea is that they need to agree on a time frame in advance. Finally, the only purpose that he allowed was for them to devote themselves to prayer. So he permitted married couples to abstain if they wanted to spend an extended period of time talking to God. But then they needed to come back together and have sexual relations again once that time was over.

Then Paul ended verse 5 by talking about why it’s so important for a husband and wife not to deprive each other apart from this exception. He said that otherwise Satan might tempt them because of their lack of self-control. So we should avoid deliberately putting ourselves in a position where we’ll be tempted by Satan. He would love for us to commit sexual immorality because of our lack of self-control. Now of course Christians should be marked by self-control, but Paul was being realistic here. We’re still

sinners, and we won't have perfect self-control until Jesus comes back. Paul knew that married people who are used to having regular sexual relations will have a hard time resisting temptation during a long period of abstinence. So a husband and wife should be careful not to deprive each other unless they agree to abstain for a limited time and for the purpose of being devoted to prayer.

Then in verse 6 Paul wrote, "I say this as a concession, not as a command." And I think he was pointing back to verse 5 and the exception that he allowed for abstinence. He was making it clear that he wasn't giving a command to abstain for the purpose of being devoted to prayer. He certainly could have given them a command in this area since he was an apostle of Jesus. But instead he just made a concession and granted permission. Then in verse 7 Paul took a step back and looked at the big picture of marriage. He gave his desire for every Christian about this whole situation. He said, "I wish that all people were as I am." Here Paul was just referring to his current marital status. And as we're going to see in verse 8, Paul was single.

Now this obviously doesn't mean that it's a sin to be married. Paul wasn't even saying that married people are inferior to single people. He was just giving a personal desire, not a moral desire. Paul used the same language in chapter 14 and verse 5 to express his wish that all the Corinthian believers spoke in tongues. But in God's sovereignty not everyone had that spiritual gift, and the same thing was true with singleness. In fact, Paul went on in chapter 7 and verse 7 to talk about singleness as a gift. He said, "But each has his own gift from God." So Paul wished that every Christian could be single, but then he made a strong contrast. He knew that his personal desire in this area would not be fulfilled. He knew that God gave two different gifts in this area. That's why Paul added two short phrases at the end of the verse. He said that "one person has this gift, another has that."

The Greek word for gift here is pronounced almost exactly like our English word "charisma." But these two words have quite different meanings. The English word refers to the quality of having a special charm or appeal that arouses people's enthusiasm and loyalty. But the Greek word just refers to a gift that is freely and graciously given. The root of this word is pronounced "charis," which is the Greek word for grace. Paul used this word over and over to refer to God's undeserved kindness. He was so enamored with God's grace that he invented this Greek word "charisma." As far as we can tell, Paul was the first person in history to use this word. He wanted to stress just how gracious God is when he gives gifts to us.

Now sometimes Paul used this word to refer to the gift of salvation. The clearest example of this nuance is found in Romans 6:23. In that verse Paul wrote, "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life." So we deserve to be separated from God forever because of our sin, but God graciously gave us the gift of eternal life when we turned from our sins and trusted in Jesus alone to save us. But normally Paul used this word to refer to what we call spiritual gifts. We're going to see it used five times in 1 Corinthians 12 with that meaning. A spiritual gift is a special, ongoing ability from God that he gives to every believer at the time of salvation so that we can serve each other and build up the church. In 1 Peter 4:10 we're actually commanded to use our spiritual gifts! That's why we should study Scripture to learn about the different spiritual gifts and figure out which one we have. We might even have more than one spiritual gift!

But in 1 Corinthians 7:7 Paul was not talking about the gift of salvation or what we call spiritual gifts. Instead it seems pretty obvious that he was referring to singleness and marriage. Both of these statuses are gracious gifts from God that we should appreciate. We should not think of single people as second-class citizens in God's kingdom. Paul himself was single, and he wished that all Christians could have that status. But he also recognized that marriage was a good gift from God. So we need to make sure that we have a balanced view on singleness and marriage. Some people rush into an unwise marriage because they don't want to be single anymore. But singleness is a gift from God that gives us extra time to serve him. And yet marriage is also a wonderful gift from God for us to enjoy. So there's nothing wrong with getting married if that's what we want to do.

Now let's move on to 1 Corinthians 7:8. We're ready to cover some new material. Look at what Paul wrote in this verse: "I say to the unmarried and to widows: It is good for them if they remain as I am." So in verse 7 Paul talked about the gifts of singleness and marriage, and in verses 8–9 Paul gave some elaboration on those two gifts. In verse 8 he talked about singleness, and in verse 9 he talked about marriage. We'll cover verse 8 and today and then move on to verse 9 next week. Now verse 8 actually starts with a conjunction, and it's the same one that we saw in the beginning of verse 6 and the beginning of verse 7 last week. The Christian Standard Bible doesn't translate this conjunction in any of these three verses. But the Legacy Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible both give us the word "but" here in verse 8. And I think that they're right to see a slight contrast here, just like we had in verses 6 and 7.

So Paul was talking about both singleness and marriage at the end of verse 7, but here in verse 8 he focused on singleness. He had something to say to those who were single. But before we look at what he said to them at the end of verse 8, we need to look at how he referred to them in the beginning of the verse. He used two words to refer to them: unmarried and widows. Let's talk about each of these words. The Greek word for unmarried is used only four times in the New Testament, and all four of them occur in this chapter. We're going to see this word again in verses 11, 32, and 34. It's pronounced "agamos," and it has two parts. The word "gamos" just refers to being married, but there's a prefix that means "not." We use this prefix in the word "atheist." A theist believes in the existence of God, but an atheist does not believe in the existence of God.

So the word "agamos" just refers to someone who is not married. There's nothing inherent in this word that communicates whether the person has ever been married. And if the person was married, it doesn't say whether that person was divorced or widowed. It's just talking about the person's current marital status. Now the context can certainly limit the meaning of this word to a particular type of single person. For example, in verse 11 this word is clearly referring to a divorced woman. There Paul said that if a wife leaves her husband, "she must remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband." So that statement is obviously referring a woman who got divorced from her husband.

But in verse 8 we don't have a clear reference to divorce. Instead we see that Paul added a reference to widows. The Greek word for widows just refers to a woman whose husband has died. It's used 26 times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote nine of them. But he did not use this word anywhere else in 1 Corinthians. In fact, all eight of the other occurrences that he wrote are found in 1 Timothy 5. That's the pas-

sage where Paul discusses the qualifications for widows to be supported by the church. In verse 3 he said that the church should “support widows who are genuinely in need.” But in verse 4 he said that “if any widow has children or grandchildren, let them learn to practice godliness toward their own family first and to repay their parents, for this pleases God.”

I love that statement about repaying our parents. They do so much for us when we’re young, so it’s the least that we can do to provide for them when they get old. But even if our parents don’t need financial assistance, they will probably need other kinds of help like medical assistance. And that’s especially true after one of our parents has died. Our widowed parent is now alone and will eventually need help. And we should view it as a privilege to help in any way that we can. In fact, Paul said in 1 Timothy 5:8 that “if anyone does not provide for his own family, especially for his own household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.” Refusing to help our parents if they’re in need when they get older is the sign of an unbelieving heart. It shows a tremendous amount of selfishness and a complete lack of gratitude for everything that they’ve done for us.

So the primary way that a widow should receive support is from her family. But the church should be standing by and ready to help a godly widow who does not have that kind of support, as long as she meets the qualifications listed in 1 Timothy 5. Verse 9 says that she needed to be an older woman of at least 60 years of age who had been faithful to her husband. And verse 10 says that she needed to be well known for good works. In other words, she needed to be someone who brought up children, showed hospitality, and helped the afflicted. And verse 5 mentions that she would have been someone who put her hope in God and continued night and day in her petitions and prayers. So she basically needed to be a woman of godly character.

But in 1 Corinthians 7:8 Paul was talking about widows in general. And he put them alongside a group of people whom he called “the unmarried.” Now some Bible scholars think that Paul was just referring to all unmarried people with that word. Then they say that Paul went on to mention widows as a prominent example of unmarried people. And this interpretation is certainly a possibility. But I think there’s a better interpretation that makes more sense here. I believe it’s more likely that Paul was referring to widowers when he used the word “unmarried.” And there are several good reasons for taking this interpretation. One of them is that Paul discussed other types of unmarried people at length later in this chapter. In verses 10–16 he addressed the subject of divorce, and in verses 25–38 he talked about virgins. So I think it’s likely that he was focused specifically on widowers and widows in verses 8–9.

Now we might wonder why Paul didn’t just use a more specific Greek word for widowers in verse 8. There was certainly a Greek word for widowers, but it was never a common word, and as far as we can tell, it was no longer used during New Testament times. Instead this Greek word for unmarried was used in its place. And this change makes good sense. After all, the word for widow had a negative connotation attached to it. It referred to a woman who was not only unmarried but in many cases was also destitute. In that culture a woman without a husband was in a vulnerable situation. Normally she would not have been able to provide for herself. That’s why Paul addressed the subject of providing for widows at length in 1 Timothy 5.

But a widower was in a different situation. He would not have been destitute unless perhaps he was very old. But under most circumstances he could have continued to work and provide for himself without any difficulty. And so I think that's why the Greeks didn't use a word that specifically means "widower." Widows and widowers didn't have a lot in common besides the fact that they both lost their spouse. But otherwise their situations were quite different. And even our English words reflect that fact to some degree. Normally when we have male and female terms that come from the same root, the male term is the shorter one. For example, we have the word "host" that refers to a man and the word "hostess" that refers to a woman. But "widow" refers to a woman, while "widower" refers to a man. So the word "widow" is the more basic term that points to a more common and difficult situation in history.

But there's one more good reason that I think Paul was talking specifically about widowers and widows in 1 Corinthians 7:8. Throughout this chapter Paul was careful to address both husbands and wives side by side. We've already seen that pattern in verses 2–4, and we're going to see it again in verses 10–16. So it makes good sense that Paul would use that approach here in verse 8 as well. Now I'm not saying that Paul's words in verses 8–9 don't have any relevance for other unmarried people. In fact, we're going to see him give some similar instructions to divorced people and virgins later in this chapter. And I think that verse 9 in particular has broad application for all single people. But I believe that Paul was focused primarily on widowers and widows in these two verses.

So now that we've figured out whom Paul was talking to in verse 8, let's take a look at what he wrote to them at the end of the verse. He said, "It is good for them if they remain as I am." Now the beginning of this statement should sound familiar. We've already seen the first four words earlier in this passage. At the end of verse 1 Paul quoted the Corinthian believers, and here's what the English Standard Version says: "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman." In the original Greek text both of these statements start with the same word that means "good." So in verse 8 Paul was clearly pointing back to this quotation. And he was showing that he didn't disagree with it completely. Now he certainly didn't think that it applied to married people. He made that point abundantly clear in verses 2–5. But now we can see that he agreed with it as long as the application was limited to at least some single people. He thought that it was a good thing for widows and widowers not to get married and have sexual relations but to remain single as he was.

Now the Greek word for remain is pretty common in the New Testament. It's used about 120 times, and more than half of them are found in John's writings. In John 15:4 Jesus said, "Remain in me, and I in you. Just as a branch is unable to produce fruit by itself unless it remains on the vine, neither can you unless you remain in me." In 1 John 2:6 we're told that "the one who says he remains in him should walk just as he walked." So those verses are talking about our need to remain loyal to Jesus and depend on him. But in 1 Corinthians 7 Paul used this word five times to talk about remaining in the same marital state that we're currently in. And in verse 8 he encouraged the widows and widowers to remain as he was.

So Paul was clearly single at the time he wrote this letter. But the big question is whether he was ever married. I don't see any evidence in Scripture or church tradition that he got married after this time. But I do think there is enough evidence for us to conclude at least tentatively that he was previously married.

We know from ancient historical records that members of the Sanhedrin had to be married. The Sanhedrin was basically an assembly of the most respected Jewish leaders. Now we don't know if Paul was ever a member of the Sanhedrin. But listen to what he said in Galatians 1:14: "I advanced in Judaism beyond many contemporaries among my people, because I was extremely zealous for the traditions of my ancestors." So I think it's likely that even if Paul never became a member of the Sanhedrin, he was probably on the fast track for joining that assembly. And this means that most likely he would have gotten married at some point.

But what happened to his wife? I think the most natural conclusion is that she died. After all, Paul was talking to widows and widowers in 1 Corinthians 7:8, and he recommended that they remain as he was. But this comparison makes more sense if he was also a widower. And I think it provides further confirmation that Paul was talking to both widows and widowers in this verse, not just widows. Now it's certainly possible that Paul's wife may have divorced him after he became a Christian. Paul went on to deal with this kind of situation in verse 15. Perhaps he was motivated to address it because he went through it himself. But if his wife divorced him, I think he would have mentioned his own marital situation when he talked about divorce. So I'm more inclined to think that he faced the possibility that his wife would divorce him but that she chose to stay married to him. He talked about that situation in verse 12.

But how could his wife have ended up dying at such a young age? I think the most likely answer is that she died during childbirth. Perhaps she died before their first child could be born safely. After all, we have no evidence in Scripture that Paul had any physical children. Now did Paul's wife die before or after he became a Christian? If she died before his conversion, I think he would have remarried within a short time. So I suspect she died not too long after his conversion. And because Paul knew within a short time that God had appointed him to go to the Gentiles, he would not have been inclined to get remarried. He remained single so that he could focus on serving the Lord.

So in verse 8 Paul recommended that other widows and widowers follow his example and remain single. Now he wasn't giving them a command here. He was just saying that remaining single is a good option to consider. He wasn't implying that it's the only good option. We've already seen in verse 7 that both singleness and marriage are gifts from God. But Paul didn't want widows and widowers to rush into another marriage without considering the possibility of remaining single. There are a lot of advantages to being single, as we're going to see later in this chapter. I don't think Paul could have done all the missionary work that he did if he had a family. His singleness gave him the freedom to serve the Lord in ways that he couldn't have if he were married.

So the point here is not that Paul was once married and then remained single after his wife died. Ultimately we don't know for sure that Paul was ever married. But what we do know for sure is that he was single when he wrote this letter, and his point here in verse 8 was that widows and widowers should recognize that it's a good option to remain single. And we have some wonderful examples in Scripture of widows or widowers who served the Lord faithfully. In 1 Kings 17 we learn about a widow who provided housing for the prophet Elijah during a long drought. Even though she was almost out of food, she gave some to Elijah and trusted in Elijah's promise that God would provide more food.

But perhaps the most powerful example of a godly widow in Scripture is Anna. We learn about her in Luke 2. When baby Jesus was presented to the Lord at the temple, there were two older saints who were privileged to see him before they died. The first one was Simeon, and the second one was Anna. Let's see what Scripture tells us about Anna in Luke 2:36–38: “There was also a prophetess, Anna, a daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was well along in years, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, and was a widow for eighty-four years. She did not leave the temple, serving God night and day with fasting and prayers. At that very moment, she came up and began to thank God and to speak about him to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.”

So Anna was only married for seven years before her husband died. But instead of getting remarried, she lived as a widow for 84 years. Most people don't even live that long! But she lived as a widow for all that time. She must have been at least 105 years old at this point. But verse 37 says that she stayed at the temple all the time and served God with fasting and prayer. Here's someone who understood the value of singleness! She was able to devote herself to prayer, just like Paul talked about in 1 Corinthians 7:5. But she didn't need to get permission from her husband because she wasn't married! And I think verse 38 gives us a hint about the focus of her prayers. She was praying for the arrival of the Messiah! When she saw Jesus, she thanked God and talked to everyone who was looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem. She told people that Jesus had come to set his people free from slavery to sin.

So Anna was a wonderful example of how to make the most of our singleness as a widow or a widower. She could have easily gotten remarried as a young widow. But instead she chose to remain single and devote her life to serving the Lord. She was a prayer warrior and an evangelist! And I'm sure she did many other good deeds as well. So Paul was not the first person to understand the value of singleness. He was just following the example of Anna. And he wanted other Christian widows and widowers to consider following her example as well. He wasn't giving a command but just a recommendation. Staying single isn't for everyone, but those who are able to do it can have a powerful impact for the Lord. Let's close in prayer and thank God for the blessing of singleness.