

# 1 CORINTHIANS 7:9

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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 verses 2–4 Paul responded by saying that abstinence is not allowed for married people. A husband and wife have a marital duty to give sexual intimacy to each other. They are under each other's authority in this area.

But in verse 5 Paul did grant one exception to this rule. He said that a husband and wife could abstain as long as it was for the purpose of being devoted to prayer. But they had to agree on it and choose a specific length of time. And they needed to come back together and have sexual relations again once that time was over. Then Paul ended this verse 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. All Christians should be growing in self-control, but we won't reach perfection in this area until Jesus comes back. And so married people who are used to having regular sexual relations may have a hard time resisting temptation during a long period of abstinence. That's why Paul said in verse 6 that he was giving this exception as a concession and not as a command. He did not require married couples to abstain for the purpose of prayer. He just gave them permission to do it.

Then in verse 7 Paul took a step back and looked at the big picture of marriage. He said, "I wish that all people were as I am." But as we can 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. And so Paul went on in verse 7 to say that "each has his own gift from God, one person has this gift, another has that." Paul knew that God gives two different gifts in this area. He didn't say what they are, but it's pretty clear that he was referring to singleness and marriage. Both of these statuses are gracious gifts from God that we should appreciate.

Then in verses 8–9 Paul gave some elaboration on these two gifts. In verse 8 he talked about singleness, and then in verse 9 he talked about marriage. We looked at verse 8 last week. Here Paul wrote, "I say to the unmarried and to widows: It is good for them if they remain as I am." So in this verse Paul had something to say to those who were single. But first he referred them as the unmarried and widows. Now the Greek word for unmarried just refers generally 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 mar-

ried, it doesn't say whether that person was divorced or widowed. It's just talking about the person's current marital status.

But the context can limit the meaning of this word to a particular type of single person. This word appears again in verse 11, and there it's clearly referring to a divorced woman. 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. In other words, it does not refer to widows and widowers but just to widows. And so most likely the word "unmarried" was Paul's way of referring to widowers here. After all, he was careful to address both husbands and wives side by side throughout this chapter. We've already seen that pattern in verses 2–4, and we're going to see it again in verses 10–16.

Now Paul's words in verses 8–9 certainly have 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. But I believe that he was focused primarily on widowers and widows in these two verses. And at the end of verse 8 he said, "It is good for them if they remain as I am." Paul was pointing back to the quotation from the Corinthian believers in verse 1. They said that it is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman. So obviously Paul didn't disagree with this statement completely. He already argued in verses 2–5 that it didn't apply to married couples. But here we can see that he agreed with it as long as the application was limited to 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 as he was.

So Paul was clearly single at the time that he wrote this letter. Now we can't be certain about whether he was previously married. But 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. And I think it's reasonable to conclude that before Paul became a Christian, he was either a member of that group or was on the fast track for joining it. So most likely he would have gotten married at some point. But then his wife either died or divorced him after he converted to Christianity. And I think it's more likely that she died, perhaps during childbirth. After all, Paul was talking to widows and widowers in verse 8, and he encouraged them to remain as he was. But this comparison makes more sense if he was also a widower and lost his spouse like they did.

So in this verse 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.

But Paul wasn't the first person to understand the value of singleness. In Luke 2 we read about a godly widow named Anna, who was only married for seven years before her husband died. But instead of get-

ting 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. And verse 37 says that she stayed at the temple all the time and served God with fasting and prayer. So she was a prayer warrior, but when she saw baby Jesus, she became an evangelist as well. Verse 38 says that 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 staying single isn't for everyone, but those who are able to do it can have a powerful impact for the Lord like Paul and Anna did.

Now let's move on to 1 Corinthians 7:9. We're ready to cover some new material. Look at what Paul wrote in this verse: "But if they do not have self-control, they should marry, since it is better to marry than to burn with desire." Paul started this verse with the word "but," which introduces a contrast with the previous verse. In verse 8 Paul was focused on God's gift of singleness, but here in verse 9 he was focused on God's gift of marriage. And he launched this focus on marriage by giving a conditional statement. He said, "If they do not have self-control." The word "they" is just pointing back to the widows and the widowers in verse 8. Paul wasn't talking about people who have never been married before. He was referring specifically to people who were once married, but then their spouse died. And he was considering a scenario in which some of them did not have self-control.

The Greek word for self-control is a verb that's used only twice in the New Testament. The other one was also written by Paul, and it's also found in this letter. In chapter 9 and verses 24–25 Paul said, "Don't you know that the runners in a stadium all race, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way to win the prize. Now everyone who competes exercises self-control in everything. They do it to receive a perishable crown, but we an imperishable crown." So Paul was using the image of competing in a race as an illustration of the Christian life. Just like a person needs self-control to be a great runner and win a race, so also a Christian needs self-control to resist temptation and remain faithful to the Lord. That's basically what Paul was talking about here in chapter 7 as well.

But in verse 9 Paul was talking about a specific kind of self-control. It's the same kind of self-control that he was referring to back in verse 5. The Greek word there comes from the same root as our Greek word here in verse 9. In both places he was talking about self-control in the area of sexual intimacy. In verse 5 he said that married couples who abstain might be tempted to commit sexual sin because of their lack of self-control. And in verse 9 he said that some widows and widowers may lack self-control in this area as well. After all, they were used to having regular sexual intimacy when they were married. So it's hard for them to get used to being single and not having sexual relations anymore.

But the problem here is not that these people have sexual desires. That's something that basically every human being experiences, because it's how God made us. The problem is when we don't control those desires. We let a general desire for sexual intimacy become a specific desire to have sexual relations with someone who is off limits to us. And then that sinful desire can easily lead to sinful actions. That's what was happening with some of the Corinthian believers. Because they lacked self-control, they were going to prostitutes to find sexual fulfillment. That's why Paul rebuked them so strongly about this sin back in chapter 6. And I think this rebuke forms the background for Paul's instructions here in chapter 7.

So when Paul mentioned the possibility in verse 9 that some of the Christian widows and widowers in Corinth didn't have self-control, he was saying that they were going to prostitutes instead of abstaining from sexual relations. He didn't just say that they struggled with self-control. He said that they did not have self-control. Now some Bible translations say that they could not exercise self-control. The English Standard Version, the New International Version, and the New Living Translation all take this interpretation. For example, the English Standard Version says, "If they cannot exercise self-control." The implication here seems to be that these people were not capable of having self-control in this area.

But this interpretation is going beyond a straightforward reading of the passage. There is no word or phrase in the Greek text that suggests the idea that the Corinthian believers weren't capable of having self-control in this area. Plus this interpretation is theologically problematic. Galatians 5:23 tells us that self-control is part of the fruit of the Spirit. If we are truly saved and have the Holy Spirit living in us, then he's going to be helping us to grow in the area of self-control. So it's just wrong to say that a Christian cannot exercise self-control. God has freed us from slavery to sin and given us the power to obey him. If we don't have self-control in any area of our lives like sexuality, then it's our fault. We're responsible for our lack of self-control. We can't simply claim that we're unable to control ourselves and avoid sinning in a particular area. That's why Paul later said in 1 Corinthians 10:13 that God will not allow us to be tempted beyond what we are able. God's power is always available to help us say "no" to temptation.

So the Christian Standard Bible, the Legacy Standard Bible, and the New American Standard Bible give us the correct interpretation in chapter 7 and verse 9. In these translations Paul was presenting the possibility that some widows and widowers did not have self-control. The problem wasn't that they could not have self-control. It was that they did not have self-control. They did not take advantage of the resources that we have in Christ to resist sexual temptation. And so Paul completed his conditional statement in verse 9 by saying that "if they do not have self-control, they should marry." The Greek word for marry 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 it three times in 1 Timothy, but the other nine occurrences are in 1 Corinthians. And all of them are found right here in chapter 7. The first two are in verse 9, and we'll see the others later in this chapter.

Now when the Christian Standard Bible says that "they should marry," it sounds like Paul was just saying that it would be a good idea for these people to get married. The English Standard Version and the New International Version have the same phrase. But the Legacy Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible are even weaker here. These translations say, "Let them marry." That makes it sound like Paul was just giving these people permission to marry. In other words, they could get married if they wanted to, but they didn't have to. However, in the Greek text Paul used a verb in the imperative mood. In other words, he wasn't just making a suggestion; he was giving a command!

Now usually commands are in the second person. I give these kinds of commands to my kids all the time. For example, just recently I told one of them to wash the dishes. And that command was in the second person because the word "you" was implied. So a second person command is given directly to the listener or the reader. But in verse 9 we don't have a command in the second person. Instead Paul used a third

person command. We actually just saw some third person commands back in verses 2–3. They’re not very common in Greek, but in English they’re even more rare. It’s actually not very easy to think of a good example. The only one that I could come up with is this statement: “Somebody help me!” So this command is not directed to a specific person. Instead it’s given more indirectly to people in general. But it’s still a command!

So our Bible translations are just too weak here in verse 9. They don’t convey the force of a command like Paul was intending. But since we don’t really use third person commands in English, it’s not easy to figure out a good translation here. My preference is to remove the word “should” in the Christian Standard Bible and replace it with the word “must.” It’s a much stronger term compared to the word “should.” It leaves no doubt that Paul was talking about something that’s required, not something that’s optional. He wasn’t simply giving permission or making a recommendation here! He was giving an order under divine inspiration to widows and widowers who didn’t have self-control in their sexual behavior. He said that they must get married.

Now this doesn’t mean that we should wait to get married until we’ve committed sexual sin. Paul wasn’t saying that we must remain single unless we can’t resist sexual temptation. He wasn’t giving us a command to remain single. He was just presenting singleness as a good option for us to consider. Single people have the freedom under God’s law to get married if they choose. But what Paul was saying here is that some single people must get married. If widows and widowers are weak spiritually and lack the self-control to resist sexual temptation, then it’s God’s will for them to get married. This doesn’t mean that these people should go out and get married to someone that day. They shouldn’t rush into a sinful marriage or even an unwise marriage. But they need to be pursuing marriage diligently and make it a high priority to get married soon.

And Paul finished verse 9 by giving a reason for these people to obey his command. He said that they must marry “since it is better to marry than to burn with desire.” The Greek word for since is normally translated with the word “for.” It usually introduces an explanation for the previous statement, and in this case it’s giving the reason that Paul commanded marriage in this particular circumstance. And what he did here was make a comparison between two situations. One situation is to get married, just as he commanded earlier in the verse. Paul used the same Greek verb in both halves of this verse. The other situation is to burn with desire. And Paul clearly stated that getting married was better than burning with desire. That’s why he gave the command for certain people to get married!

But what did Paul mean when he talked about burning with desire? First of all, we need to realize that Paul didn’t give us a word or a phrase that means “with desire.” The Greek text just literally says “to burn,” and that’s how the sentence concludes at the end of verse 9. But most Bible versions add a phrase at the end of this verse because the translators are trying to help us understand what Paul meant here. Even the Legacy Standard Bible and the New American Standard do this. They have the phrase “with passion” at the end of the verse, but the translators put it in italics to show us that it’s not a literal translation from the original Greek. So we need to take a closer look at the word “burn” so that we can make sure we understand what Paul meant by it.

The Greek word for burn is used six times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote three of them. It's used in 2 Peter 3:12, where it refers to the fact that the heavens and the earth will be burned with fire as part of God's future judgment. And certainly fire is used as a picture of judgment in Scripture. In the Old Testament God rained down burning sulfur from heaven when he destroyed the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. In Mark 9:43 Jesus described hell as "the unquenchable fire." Matthew 25:41 tells us that one day Jesus will say to unbelievers, "Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels." Scripture is clear that unbelievers will be judged in hell for all eternity with unquenchable fire.

So there is some reason to think that Paul may have been talking about eternal punishment in 1 Corinthians 7:9. The point would be that it's better for widows and widowers without self-control to get married than to continue committing sexual sin and end up being judged in hell. After all, back in chapter 6 and verse 9 Paul said that the unrighteous will not inherit God's kingdom. And when he listed some prominent examples of unrighteous people, the first ones in his list were sexually immoral people. So professing Christians who continue living in sexual sin are not truly saved. They're not going to reign with Jesus when he comes back to rule on earth for a thousand years. Instead they're going to be punished in hell for all eternity.

So Paul may have been talking about burning in God's judgment at the end of chapter 7 and verse 9. But I agree with most Bible translations that Paul was talking about burning with desire. Paul also used the Greek word for burn in 2 Corinthians 11:29. In that verse he said, "Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to stumble, and I do not burn with indignation?" In this passage Paul was talking about the daily pressure that he faced to watch over a variety of churches. He cared greatly for the believers in these churches and identified with them when they were struggling. If someone was a stumbling block that led a believer to sin, then Paul responded by burning with indignation. So in that verse the burning was an inner passion that led him to express righteous anger toward those who were the stumbling block.

Now there's nothing wrong with anger as long as it's directed against sin and motivated by the glory of God. In Ephesians 4:26 Paul actually commanded us to be angry but warned us not to sin in our anger. And the key that he gave us was not to let the sun go down on our anger. If we stay angry for long, our righteous anger could easily turn into unrighteous anger. So in 2 Corinthians 11 Paul's inner passion led him to respond appropriately, but in 1 Corinthians 7 the inner passion of some of the Corinthian believers led them to respond inappropriately. Their desire for sexual relations was not inherently wrong, but their lack of self-control led them to be consumed by their desire and commit sexual immorality. That's why Paul commanded the widows and widowers who lacked self-control to get married.

Now I think it's safe to conclude that Paul was thinking primarily about younger widows and widowers here. And we can get confirmation from 1 Timothy 5, where Paul gave the qualifications for widows to receive support from the church. Verse 9 says that they needed to be at least 60 years old. But in verse 14 Paul focused on the younger widows. He said, "I want younger women to marry, have children, manage their households, and give the adversary no opportunity to accuse us." Now Paul didn't actually give a command here like he did in 1 Corinthians 7:9. He was just expressing his strong desire for younger wid-

ows in general. But I think he left a little wiggle room here for some exceptions. He knew that some younger widows have self-control and can follow his recommendation to remain single. But he expected most younger widows to get married.

So what we see in 1 Corinthians 7:9 is that marriage provides a measure of protection against sexual immorality. Now Paul was focused on widows and widowers here, and I think he did that because they would have struggled the most with sexual temptation. After all, they used to be married and enjoy regular sexual intimacy. But I think this verse has application for other single people as well. That's especially true in our modern age where we are bombarded with sexual temptation almost everywhere we go. And as a result many people give into temptation and become sexually active before they get married. They may not technically go to a prostitute, but they have sexual relations with someone who isn't their spouse.

Now these single people are not under Paul's command in verse 9 to get married. And so I believe that they should consider Paul's recommendation in verse 8 to remain single. They should work hard to develop self-control and learn to say no to sexual temptation. But if they continue to struggle with sexual sin and find themselves burning with sexual desire, then they should probably get married. After all, marriage is the only setting in which we can have sexual relations and be pleasing to God. Now of course marriage isn't just about enjoying sexual intimacy, but it's certainly a big part of marriage. It's a good gift from God that helps us to avoid sinning against him. Let's close in prayer and ask for God's help to please him, whether we're single or married.