

Prayers

Opening prayer

Lord God Almighty, remind us, when we are enjoying ourselves, of the real world in which we live. A world in which people suffer, children cry for help, people kill each other, and nations are ruled by tyrants. We bring our own private requests to You, Lord God, but may we never waste any time in doing the work of the Gospel, which is to serve You by giving our time to those who need our help. We ask this in Jesus' name; AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas_(Alternatives that can broaden the experience of prayer)

Reflect upon the different parts of your body, give thanks to God specifically for each part, and pray for its health. Ask the Lord whether there is anything you might do to improve your health and the functioning of your body – for His glory!

On-going prayers

- **Pray this week for 'industry'**. Pray for small industries that depend on larger ones, and ask God to bless honest work done
- Pray for the country of Norway still mourning after the tragedies of the recent killings. Pray also for Sudan, and those who face famine in the horn of Africa.
- Give thanks to God for those who have recently received salvation. Pray that they will be wisely led and taught, especially about baptism

Meditation

Listen for the voice, O my soul,
The call that tells you
when and how and where to do God's will.

See the shining light, O my soul,
And let it shine forever brightly
in the darker corners of our world.

Seek the true 'shalom', O my soul,
The Spirit's gracious gift
that calms and soothes a troubled breast.

Turn the coming corner, O my soul,
Redirect your heart and eyes
towards the glorious heavenly goal.

Speak the eternal truth, O my soul,
Hear the powerful Word
known only by the Spirit's revelation.

Accept the love of Christ, O my soul,
Receive within your heart
the grace of all His saving passion.

Stay open to your God, O my soul,
See and hear and do
the things of faith by which you truly live.

Bible Study

Bible passage – 1 Corinthians 7:25-40

²⁵ Now then, I have no command from the Lord concerning unmarried women, but I give my opinion as one who is trustworthy by the mercy of the Lord.

²⁶ This is what I think is best, in view of the present crisis; it is good for people to stay as they are. ²⁷ Are you married? Do not seek divorce. Are you unmarried? Do not seek a wife. ²⁸ But if you do marry, you have not sinned, and if an unmarried woman marries, she has not sinned; yet those who do will have trouble of an earthly kind, and I would spare you that.

²⁹ This is what I mean, fellow believers. The time has become very short. From now on, let those who have wives act as though they had none, ³⁰ those mourning as not mourning, those rejoicing as not rejoicing, those buying as having no possessions, ³¹ and those dealing with the world as having no dealings with it. For the form of this world is passing away, ³² and I want you to be free from anxieties.

The single man is anxious about the things of the Lord and how to please the Lord, ³³ but the married man is anxious about worldly things and how to please his wife, ³⁴ and he is divided. But the single woman and the unmarried girl is anxious about the things of the Lord and how to be holy in body and spirit, whereas the married woman is anxious about worldly things and how to please her husband. ³⁵ I say this for your own good, not to place a restriction on you, but to promote good order and undivided devotion to the Lord.

³⁶ If anyone thinks he is acting improperly towards his unmarried daughter, if she is past the normal age for marriage and it has to be, then let him do as he wishes, it is no sin; let her marry. ³⁷ But he who has settled the matter in his own heart is under no obligation, he has the will power to stand firm in this and does well to keep his daughter unmarried. ³⁸ So then, the one who gives his daughter in marriage does well, but the one who does not does even better.

³⁹ A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to marry whoever she wishes, only in the Lord. ⁴⁰ Yet in my judgment she is happier if she remains as she is; and I think that I too have the Spirit of God.

Review

This is a rather lengthy and complicated passage, but if we are to understand it properly it must not be broken up into smaller parts. It deals with the question of whether people should marry or not, and in answering this question, Paul says much more. He justifies his advice by saying that the time is short (7:29), meaning that he expects the Lord's return at any moment. In general, Paul's advice about marriage is that it should not be entered into lightly, but whilst nothing should stop those who wish to marry there may be good reason to avoid it, for it can be a distraction from the Lord's service and be the source of stress (7:28,33f.); a distraction that is, not a hindrance. Without a doubt, what Paul says here is highly controversial!

At the beginning of the passage, Paul writes as if the Corinthians had asked specifically about whether unmarried women should marry. The question was important because in Roman times, women had no place within society unless married. Unmarried women were considered a drain on society and had no legal status or normal human rights. Naturally, the church needed authoritative teaching about whether it should maintain social tradition; normally, all young women should marry, but was this right before God?

It is obvious that Paul's advice here is rather cautious, and he says that he has no command from God about this (7:25). He goes on, however, to say that although men and women would be advised to remain 'as they are' (7:26) in order to serve the Lord (7:33-35,40), there is nothing wrong with getting married (7:28,36). He goes out of his way to say that if marriage is appropriate for someone then it should be entered into with good order and grace (7:28,36-38). So we are left with rather mixed messages. But what is it that lies behind what Paul says here?

In the early days of the church, people were acutely aware that the Lord was about to return. Paul wrote this letter during the reign of Emperor Claudius, between 49 and 52 A.D., when Jews and Christians alike had to keep their heads low because of persecution (see Acts 18:2). For many, this was a sign that Christ was coming soon. The urgency of this belief led many to think there was no point either in marriage or the normal affairs of life. They felt they should give themselves over exclusively to prepare for Christ's return. These

beliefs lie behind verses 29 to 32, which also echo the teachings of Jesus, calling on His disciples to face up to persecutions ahead.

As we have seen, Paul was also facing the need for Christian men to know whether to arrange for their daughters to be married, or whether to provide for them in their own households. Normally they would expect their daughters to become the responsibility of husbands, but if they were not married they would need to be looked after. This would change the dynamic of the family. No wonder the Corinthians sought Paul's advice!

But although this information is all helpful background material, how can we interpret this passage? Are we to advocate the avoidance of marriage today because the Lord is soon to return? And what can we say about Paul's advice to fathers who are concerned about their unmarried daughters?

Perhaps the best thing we do with this passage is to observe that Paul is cautious and wise in his advice; none of what he says can be said to be extreme. He could have simply agreed with those who said that no one should marry because of Christ's return, or he could have commanded Christians not to marry. He also could have told the fathers of unmarried daughters plainly that they should not let them marry but look after them within the family. However, he was given a godly wisdom not to take such a line. Despite his obvious preference for singleness and its advantage of allowing people unfettered devotion to the Lord he never quashes marriage, rather he appears quite warm and conciliatory in all he says.

Our passage today is therefore a good example of how a Christian leader might give sound advice to the people of his own times, based upon good and godly principles. Although some of it simply does not relate to our own times (notably verses 36 to 38), we can clearly see the wisdom of his advice that each individual should seek first to serve the Lord, and let all things, including marriage come under this guiding principle.

Going Deeper

- Notes on the translation of the passage
- Marriage and a difficult time (7:26-31)
- Serving 'free from anxiety' (7:32-35)
- Advice to fathers (7:36-38)
- Widows

Notes on the translation of the passage

V25 'unmarried women'

Most of this passage is about unmarried women. The Greek term 'parthenos', is the Greek for unmarried women, or 'virgins', but in this passage, Paul is not interested in virginity as such. His advice is about the status of marriage.

V26 'it is good for people to stay as they are.'

The Greek gives a masculine singular version of this; 'it is good for a man to be as he is'. However, because a general point is being made about men and women, and Paul is at pains to say the same thing here for men as women, I have felt it right to translate this without bias to men.

V28 'trouble of an earthly kind'

Some versions of the Bible translate this as 'earthly troubles' but the Greek text indicates that the word for trouble is singular. The phrase is a generality, which is the manner of Paul's speech here.

V31 'for the form of this world is passing away'

Many Bible versions have 'the present form of this world is passing away.' However, there is no Greek for 'present', and this is assumed. The Greek word here is 'schema' from which we get the word 'scheme'.

V35 'but for your good reputation'

This is a fairly accurate translation of the Greek, but most Bible versions want to try and make the Greek word here 'euschemon' (respect, high standing) mean 'good order'. This is a reasonable translation, but it avoids the clear implication of the word that it is about how other people view you and what you are doing, and that it should be good.

V36 'if anyone thinks he is acting improperly towards his unmarried daughter ...'

Unfortunately, you will find that this verse is translated quite differently in many Bible versions; for example, 'if anyone thinks he is not behaving properly towards his fiancée if his passions are strong ...'

(NRSV). There is a strong division of opinion here between scholars about the meaning of one word 'huperakmos' which I have translated 'past the normal age for marriage', where others translate this as 'strong passions'. The details of the Greek here are complex, but I have attempted to use the natural meaning of the word as it was used in Paul's day, and I believe that the translation 'strong passions' is a variant which is suggested by scholars on the assumption that the normal meaning cannot be right!

Marriage and a difficult time (7:26-31)

In verse 25, Paul was clear that he did not have any command from the Lord concerning how fathers should deal with unmarried girls, and whether they should marry or not. I suggest that this was because Paul was aware that the very question implied a parental control of marriage, which could be used to dominate young people. It is interesting that in saying this (3:25), Paul described himself as one 'trustworthy' and one who had received mercy from God (as the text says, quite literally). It is as if Paul did not want to be responsible for breaking the trust between parents and children by suggesting a rigorous line that might prevent unmarried girls from being married, thereby failing to show to others the mercy he had received himself from God.

Instead of answering the question immediately, Paul spoke of his concern about a 'present crisis' (7:26). Many authors put this comment together with Paul's remark about the time being short (7:29) and 'this world passing away' (7:31) to assume that he was talking about the return of the Lord Jesus. The reason why this may not be the case is because wherever Paul writes about the return of the Lord elsewhere, he never calls it a 'crisis', moreover, his consistent advice is that people should prepare for the coming by continuing as they are, not by preparing for change, as he suggests here, in verses 29 and 30. Also, the return of the Lord is usually described as the end of this world as we know it, together with God's recreation and a new world order (see 1 Cor 15). Here, Paul speaks about the changing 'form' of the world, which is quite different, so with no real connection with the return of Christ, these comments suggest Paul was concerned here about some other event or crisis for Christians in the Roman world. The most serious event that happened at that time was Claudius' expulsion of the Jews from Rome (see above), and this is the best suggestion for the 'crisis' Paul mentions.

Paul seems to be continually concerned not to make things difficult for people, and he offers a somewhat pastoral approach to all these matters. In verse 28, he says that despite his advice to remain single, it is not a sin to marry, though he expresses concern that marriage will bring earthly troubles. He is not suggesting trouble in the sense of arguments and strife, rather the obligations and duties that might distract someone from serving God. This becomes the main topic of the next section, verses 32 to 35.

Serving 'free from anxiety' (7:32-35)

The pastoral side of Paul appears again in his comment 'I want you to be free from anxieties' (7:32), but what he means by this in the following verses is a little confused. We might think he means that anxieties are what distracts from service to the Lord, and this is what he says about married men (7:33) and married women (7:34). In the case of marriage, concern for 'worldly things' and also for the partner is a cause for anxiety. However, if we look carefully at what Paul says about the single man (7:32) and single woman (7:34), they are also 'anxious', but about doing the Lord's work. It is difficult to work out exactly what Paul was trying to say here, apart from wishing that people were free from anxieties. The whole passage gives the impression that he supported the notion of remaining single to serve the 'things of the Lord', but the words used seem rather ambivalent.

Paul never quite says in clear and unequivocal language that someone who is not married can serve the Lord better. The idea is clearly there behind much of what he says, and he obviously believes this to be true for himself, but at the end of this section where we might expect Paul to say this very strongly, he merely says that he does not want to 'place restrictions' on people that might compromise their 'undivided devotion to the Lord'. It is not really possible to say that this passage strongly advocates singleness and celibacy as a way of life in the service of the Lord; the idea is there, but Paul does not push it. We have plenty of evidence elsewhere in 1 Corinthians that if Paul felt strongly about something, he could say it very directly and strongly, so we must assume that he did not want to make anything of the issue. His caution ties in with his opening comment about having no 'command' from the Lord about all this (7:25).

Advice to fathers (7:36-38)

It is profoundly unhelpful that there is a historic division about how to interpret verses 36 to 38. I have repeated my own translation below, and this assumes that the advice is being given to fathers who have the responsibility to arrange marriages, as explained above, and in the notes:

³⁶ *If anyone thinks he is acting improperly concerning his unmarried daughter, then if she is past her prime and it ought to be done, then let him do what he wants: let them marry, it is no sin.* ³⁷ *But he does the right thing to keep her himself as unmarried, if he has resolved this firmly in his own heart, he is under no compulsion, he has the right to do what he wants and he has made up his mind.* ³⁸

So then he who gives his unmarried daughter away in marriage does well, but he who does not give her away in marriage does even better. (PHA)

Below is another translation, the New Revised Standard Version, which assumes that the whole passage is about independent young people who are trying to work out whether to marry, and perhaps struggling with their sexual urges. You will see that the text is quite different, and in order to achieve this, the translators have assumed that 'unmarried girl' means 'fiancée' and that the words 'past her prime' in verse 36 above mean something quite different, to do with having strong passions.

³⁶ If anyone thinks that he is not behaving properly toward his fiancée, if his passions are strong, and so it has to be, let him marry as he wishes; it is no sin. Let them marry. ³⁷ But if someone stands firm in his resolve, being under no necessity but having his own desire under control, and has determined in his own mind to keep her as his fiancée, he will do well. ³⁸ So then, he who marries his fiancée does well; and he who refrains from marriage will do better. (NRSV)

Below, there is yet another translation, this time provided by the NIV, and this is very similar to my translation, but it assumes a different scenario, in which a young couple have decided to be engaged to each other, but remain engaged and do not marry in order to serve the Lord. In this case, the couple is concerned that they may not be able to keep themselves in check and thus compromise their vows, and Paul advises the man about what to do (but not the woman):

³⁶ If anyone thinks he is acting improperly toward the virgin he is engaged to, and if she is getting along in years and he feels he ought to marry, he should do as he wants. He is not sinning. They should get married. ³⁷ But the man who has settled the matter in his own mind, who is under no compulsion but has control over his own will, and who has made up his mind not to marry the virgin - this man also does the right thing. ³⁸ So then, he who marries the virgin does right, but he who does not marry her does even better. (NIV)

I accept that you may find it confusing to be presented with these different translations, but there is a serious matter here, and I will explain it shortly. First, I have translated the passage as I have because I believe it to be correct according to the context of the passage and the real situation found in the first century AD within the early church. I have rejected the assumptions of the NRSV (the second translation) because it takes too many liberties with the Greek in my opinion, and seems to assume a rather modern and independent view of how young people get married. It certainly does not reflect the social circumstances of the first century AD. Lastly I have rejected the NIV (the third translation) because the scenario it assumes of two people engaged attempting to serve the Lord by not getting married did not happen in the first century. We can only be sure that such a thing happened from the middle to late second century onwards! The only scenario that fits the first century is one in which two young people love each other, the fathers meet to arrange the marriage and any financial details, and the two, and normally immediately, proceed with married life. There may have been a small ceremony, but once the marriage was agreed, there was little of what we would call 'engagement', and no word for fiancée exists in Greek!

Unfortunately, the way that translators have translated this affects people. There is much debate today about the wisdom of young people remaining unmarried in order to serve the Lord, and some of this is not helped by the NIV translation which seems to signify to people that this was an early and acceptable practice in Paul's day. It was not. Moreover, the implication in the NIV that the decision should be taken by the man alone after personal reflection (nothing is said about the woman), can appear to some to indicate a prior male authority in this subject. Given that Paul spends the whole of chapter 7 meticulously balancing male and female responsibilities, it is profoundly unhelpful that the NIV takes this line and upsets this scriptural balance.

Widows (7:39,40)

The passage closes with a brief and unremarkable passage declaring that widows are free to marry again. This is nothing like the Jewish right of levirate marriage (see Deuteronomy 26:1f.), and no obligation is placed on a woman to preserve family rights of a deceased husband. Paul gives guidance that has stood the test of time as compassionate and realistic. His comment that the widow may be happier if she remains single is, of course, dependent upon the support of a church community that will enable her to serve the Lord and retain her dignity in the community.

Discipleship

Application

It is unfortunate wherever we find a serious division of opinion amongst scholars about the meaning of a text, especially where it has important consequences for people. However, I am of the firm opinion that people should be given the information about such differences and problems, and be able to make up their minds. Having said above how profoundly I disagree with the NIV, I respect the fact that they do in fact print an alternative translation which is close to mine, as a footnote to the page. It would be better if it was more fully explained, however. The Lord is able to guard us against misinterpretation, but it helps if we have sufficiently keen minds to beware of passages of scripture where the different common Bible versions disagree. This should flag up 'problem' to us immediately, and make the preacher cautious about preaching or using such a text until they have studied it for themselves.

It is important for us to understand that although this passage has an underlying assumption that to remain single and serve the Lord is a true and worthy call, the fact is that most people discover this is not their calling. Indeed, they find this out when they discover that they have strong 'feelings' for others, and love knocks on the door of their heart. Paul is completely tolerant of those who wish to marry, indeed, how could he be otherwise given the high view of marriage he has propounded elsewhere in the letter (chapters 6 and 7)? Paul's advice to fathers about their obligations to allow marriage is common sense, given all Paul says, as is his advice to widows, and this whole passage is remarkable for its lack of strong rhetoric and powerful argument. Here we see Paul at his best as a pastoral church leader.

Questions for groups

1. What crises in the world today threaten the life of the church? What do they teach us?
2. What does Paul mean by 'anxieties' in verses 32 to 35, and is it possible to be free of such earthly worries? Compare your thoughts with what Jesus says about worry in Matthew 7.
3. How must parents assist their children in the matter of marriage and related spiritual obligations?

Discipleship challenges

- *Have you ever been worried about whether it is right for you to be married or not? This may be a difficult question, but it is important, and this passage begs all Christians to be sure about the standing of their marriage before God. If you are worried about this, I urge you to speak to someone else about it, and seek the Lord in prayer.*
- *Pray for any you know who are concerned about whether they should marry. Many young people feel this, and feel very alone in dealing with it. Do your best to stand alongside the young people in your church as they face these important issues.*

Final Prayer

Glorious Lord; You clothe us, You feed us, You give us energy, and You nurture us; but we are not babies! You do this for us so that we might grow into the full stature of those who live by faith. May we achieve the maturity of living by faith, trusting in You, and being confident of the glories of our eternal home in heaven! We praise You, glorious Lord! AMEN.
