

**PREFACE**

There are (at least) two very good reasons to approach Chapter Seven of Paul’s letter with fear and trembling—and with sober humility:

1. Portions of it are challenging to understand and interpret—especially when we, regrettably, have been and continue to be daily schooled in our modern, fallen, culture. This is a portion of Scripture in which it is easy to respond, in places, with “Oh, surely he does not mean *that*.”
2. The one teaching this portion of Scripture is painfully aware that because of circumstances or life decisions they may have made in the past, some in the class might be uncomfortable hearing what is declared here. When this is the situation, the teacher can only gather his courage, and (paraphrasing 2 Timothy 4:2) “teach the word.”

There is one more point we should address before pressing into the text. In Chapter Seven the apostle Paul employs a manner of delineating various positions that (as best I could determine) is not expressed in this way anywhere else. Before we proceed into this chapter we need to clarify what Paul means when he writes, “Not I, but the Lord,” and “I say, not the Lord,” and “I give an opinion...”

**Read v10, 12, 25.**

Some have interpreted v10 to mean “not I, but the Lord [is telling me]...” and v12 and 25 to mean something like, “since I haven’t heard anything from the Lord, I’ll offer a best guess.” But that is not how these are to be read.

The contrast is not between authoritative revelation and guess, but explicit command stated by Jesus and authoritative apostolic command or counsel. This situation is similar to the erroneous position taken by some sects that the only *authoritative* text in the Bible are those words printed in red—which is nonsense. The Bible is God’s word from Genesis 1 to Revelation 22. In these passages Paul, in answering the questions sent to him by the church in Corinth, is referencing either something Jesus had earlier stated (“not I, but the Lord”), or his authority as someone called by Jesus Christ not just as an apostle, but to render trustworthy judgment (v25: “as one who by the mercy of the Lord is trustworthy”).

***Chapter Seven Organization***

The overarching counsel of Chapter Seven—Paul’s repeated answer to situations in and out of marriage, divorce, widowhood—is to remain in the status one was at the time of one’s call. We see this clearly if we examine the structure of the chapter.

**vv1-7** to the married: stay married with full conjugal rights  
**vv8-9** to the “unmarried” and widows: it is good to remain unmarried  
**vv10-11** to the married (both partners believers): remain married  
**vv12-16** to those with an unbelieving spouse: remain married  
**vv25-38** to “virgins”: it is good to remain unmarried  
**vv39-40** to married women and widows: the married are bound to marriage; if widowed, it is good to remain that way.

Situated in the middle of all this is the interlude of vv17-24, which expresses Paul’s point directly—except that, curiously, the examples he cites in the interlude have nothing to do with the settings in the rest of the chapter: circumcision and slavery. But the point is made explicitly three times in the interlude.

v17: ...as God has called each, in this manner let him walk.  
v20: Each man must remain in that condition in which he was called.  
v24: Brethren, each one is to remain with God in that condition in which he was called.

As we will see, Paul understands there can be exceptions and extenuating circumstances. But throughout he sees this as the “ideal.”

### *The Corinthian Position*

Throughout this study we have repeatedly made the point that from what we are learning about the church in Corinth, there are many in this world today that would feel very much at home there—and vice versa. When we think again about what the Corinthians were doing and thinking that would lead Paul to answer as he does in this letter, we realize that much of their belief system would be right at home in our world today—in this sense: They were taking snippets of theology and running wild with them. And here we have a case in point. Let’s look at something Jesus taught, answering a cynical “what if” posed by a group of Sadducees regarding marriage after the resurrection (in which they did not believe).

### **Read Luke 20:34-38.**

The gospel of Luke was written *after* First Corinthians, so the Corinthian church would not have had this teaching in writing. But comparing what Paul writes in Chapter Seven to this that Jesus said, it is not hard to imagine that the Corinthians had heard a version of this teaching of Jesus from someone and, combined with the Hellenistic spiritualism by which they were surrounded, had run with it, combining the two, and thus thoroughly missing the point Jesus was making. To wit, after the resurrection you won’t be thinking about marriage; as Eugene Peterson puts it in *The Message* paraphrase, “[You] will have better things to think about, if you can believe it. All ecstasies and intimacies then will be with God” (Luke 20:36).

The evidence would seem to indicate that there were men and women of the Corinth church who considered themselves to be so advanced spiritually they had already “realized the ‘resurrection from the dead’ by being ‘in spirit’ and [were] thus already as the angels, neither marrying nor giving in marriage” (Fee).

In this chapter the apostle addresses marriage-related questions as they are treated nowhere else in Scripture.

### Read 1 Corinthians 7:1-4.

v1

*Now concerning the things about which you wrote,*

Chapter Seven begins a new section of this letter; from here to 16:12 Paul offers responses to questions or issues the church had sent him in a letter. There are two things we should keep in mind about this:

1. From here on out we actually have not more, but *fewer* details about the “conversation” being conducted between Paul and the church. Because much of what he has addressed up to this point was obtained by him secondhand, it was necessary in this letter (First Corinthians) for him to tell them (and us) what he was referring to. So we had a clearer indication of the context and reason for his counsel. But from now on it is no longer necessary for him to write down the reason for his response, because they already know it. Hence we, as readers today, have less data than we did in the earlier portion of the letter. So we must be cautious about our assumptions, and be wary of inferring too much from the context.
2. We should not assume that this letter from the church, to which Paul is now responding, was a friendly letter, in which the membership was simply seeking clarification on a few points of doctrine. There is evidence scattered throughout First Corinthians that their letter to him was actually more combative, taking exception to what he had taught or written before.

*...it is good for a man not to touch a woman.*

The consensus among modern scholars is that the second part of this verse is *not* a declarative statement representing Paul’s position ([the traditional view](#)), but is rather his setting up this new discussion by quoting back to them something—another maxim or “slogan,” as it were—they (probably) stated in their letter to him. This is reflected in how the ESV and the most recent NIV present the verse, placing it in quotes:

Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: “It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.”

These two translations also accurately expand the euphemism “touch a woman” in the original text to “have sexual relations.”

In this the Corinthians were not espousing the biblical/Pauline command to abstain from sex outside of marriage, but a more ascetic lifestyle in which even sexual relations *within* marriage were discouraged. We will see (in the rest of Chapter Seven) that, taken at face value, the maxim, “It is good [beneficial, preferable] for a man not to touch [have sexual relations with] a woman,” was not wholly disagreeable to the apostle. In fact his own celibate life reflected it. But as we will see, Paul considered celibacy to be a *charisma*—a divine gifting, a gift which one either has or does not have from above. If it was not one’s gift, then one should be married—just as, we are discovering, it would have been better if some Catholic priests had gotten married and found some other work; they clearly did not have the *charisma* of celibacy.

Some of the Corinthians were using this slogan to justify such things as “spiritual marriages” (i.e., non-sexual marriages), divorce, or not getting married at all. Just as many do today, they were taking one idea and pumping it so full of air that it was turned into a perversion of what God intended. All we need do is compare this slogan to God’s ideal design for man and woman in the Garden.

### **Read Genesis 2:18.**

The Hebrew word translated “good” here, *tob*, is the same word God used to describe His own creation, only here it is in the negative: it is *not* good for man to be alone. And what follows is the first marriage—and the pattern for all to follow.

### **Read Genesis 2:23-25.**

Note how marriage and sex within that marriage are part of God’s “good” creation. This is not a picture that would support what the Corinthians were saying and believing. And the rest of this chapter is Paul’s rebuttal to their ascetic position on sexuality.