

PREFACE 1

As you might imagine, even before we landed in Chapter Seven I have struggled with—and earnestly prayed for—the best way to present it to a class of our composition. And, quite frankly, I would not be at all surprised to learn that our class today is smaller than it once was because some have opted out over the subject matter of Chapter Seven.

I am convinced that the way to both understand and accept the teaching of this chapter is to understand the apostle's mindset, his motive, his *worldview*. Once we adopt that, we can accept the teaching—without being either offended or embarrassed by it—because we are seeing it through the perspective—through the eyes, as it were—of a holy God wanting only the best for His children.

In other words, it is critically important that we first discover and then apprehend God's "why." Because he was the earthly author of this text, we repeatedly cite the apostle Paul. But we dare not lose sight of the fact that these are the Lord God's words, given to Paul by the Holy Spirit. Accepting this still may not remove all the discomfort factor from the text, but I believe much of that will be dissipated if we stop looking at this from an earthly, cultural, or human experience perspective, and begin looking at it from the perspective of God—and this is facilitated when we understand the "why."

This is how we are to understand the entirety of God's word, but especially in passages like this that are so contrary to the world in which we live. For example, we read things such as the command in vv10-11,

...the wife should not leave her husband (but if she does leave, she must remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband should not divorce his wife.

and our flesh cries out, "But, but..." We may not say the words out loud, but something inside us protests with, "Paul, you just do not understand the way things are today. You don't understand what I have been going through." We must quickly throw water on that flame, however, because by even thinking something like that we are saying that Almighty God doesn't know what He is doing; we are essentially calling God a liar, for He states clearly in His word that He knows very well how things are today, and knows exactly what He is doing.

Read Acts 17:24-27.

To understand God’s “why” we must first understand—and *accept*—who we are in Him. We are trained by the culture in which we dwell to always think of ourselves first, to think we know best, and that we have every right to live and do what we think is best for us. But that is an earthly, fleshly perspective. God’s perspective is quite different.

Read Acts 17:28.

As stated time and again in His word, God’s perspective is that as His children—as “Christ-ians”—we belong to Him. And what is His “why” for us? Why are we His? What is our purpose? Why are we here?

Read Psalm 96:7-10.

The prophet Isaiah says it flat out:

“I will say to the north, ‘Give them up!’
And to the south, ‘Do not hold them back.’
Bring My sons from afar
And My daughters from the ends of the earth,
Everyone who is called by My name,
And whom I have created for My glory,
Whom I have formed, even whom I have made.” (Isaiah 43:6-7)

When we turn to a challenging passage, such as Chapter Seven, we must consider it not from an earthly or fleshly perspective, but from God’s perspective—which is, to put it succinctly, His glory. Because He loves us, one of God’s “whys” is the good of His children. Why did He hand down all those laws and regulations to Israel in the Pentateuch? For their own good, for their good health, and joy and well-being. But before and above that, His “why” is that He be exalted, magnified among the nations, that He be *glorified*.

When we realize that in all things the focus of our life is to be our heavenly Father’s glory and our Savior’s glory, we approach passages like this from a supernatural, an other-worldly perspective, because as spiritual beings, we belong to that other world more than we do this world in which we now dwell. Doing so, it doesn’t matter that His counsel is challenging or uncomfortable; He is Lord! and we belong to Him. *We obey because it brings honor and glory to His name.*

Secondarily, His “why” is that it is for our own good. We are His children and He loves us; His commands and His counsel are for our well-being. But we only understand this if we see it from His perspective.

Now, let’s return to our passage, and examine it by means of this method.

PREFACE 2

In our church we have R.O.M.E.O. (Retired Old Men Eating Out)—a bunch of old guys who meet for breakfast once a month to accomplish little more than add to their cholesterol level. When I was a little kid in Marshalltown back in the fifties, and even before I was born, our church (First Baptist) had the “Gamos Club.” From some of the old pictures I have scanned, this group, of which my parents were a part, did some pretty silly things at their gatherings. I have pictures of the group looking like they were dressed to go out Trick-or-Treating. It was only recently I learned what the word “gamos” means. This was a social group within the church for married couples, and the name of the group was taken from the Greek word for “married”: *gamos*.

In the passage before us, in vv10-11, the apostle addresses the *gamos*—the married—but first, in vv8-9, he addresses the *agamos*—the unmarried—and widows. (More accurately, *gamoj* and *agamoj*, because it is in the plural.)

Read 1 Corinthians 7:8-11.

When we began our study of Chapter Seven, I pointed out that the overarching counsel in this portion of the letter—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 can see this from our recent studies, as well as the one immediately before us.

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

v8

But I say to the unmarried and to widows that it is good for them if they remain even as I.

With v8 Paul begins a series of three statements in which he applies his general rule of “stay as you are.” This verse has several challenges to understanding precisely what is being said—not least, just who is Paul speaking of when he uses *agamoj*, more often translated “unmarried”? I think Gordon Fee’s conclusion is the most sensible. Because widows are specifically singled out in this verse, and because later, in vv25ff, virgins (*parthenos*) are addressed, it makes sense that *agamos* in v8 does not refer to anyone and everyone not currently or ever married. Instead Paul is referring to widowers, and “unmarried” could and perhaps should be translated, “demarried.” Thus in v8 Paul is addressing those of both sexes who were once married, but have lost their spouse through death. So we could paraphrase v8, *But I say to widowers and to widows that it is good for them remain unmarried and celibate—as I am.*

Now we must apply our godly perspective and ask: Why does God say it is best that those who have lost their mates remain unmarried? We find at least one answer to this question in Paul's lengthier treatise on widows in the church in his first letter to Timothy. [Please turn there](#). But before we read that passage, remember that in 1 Timothy Paul is addressing different situations in a different congregation. So while the counsel harmonizes well, there is a different tone, with different emphases.

Read 1 Timothy 5:5.

Here Paul is speaking, initially, of widows age 60 or older who are "widows indeed," that is, widows without family or any other resources and utterly dependent on the church. They are to "fix their hope on God and continue in entreaties and prayers night and day." In other words, whereas once their lives were focused on their husband, now they are to be focused on their Lord. As v2 states, those who are younger in the church are to look up to the older women (especially the widows), honoring them as "mothers." The picture of older widows in the NT is one of the woman being dedicated to piety and devotion to the Lord: if she has family, for their sake; if she does not, for the church's sake. [Return to First Corinthians](#). [Look at v34](#).

The woman who is unmarried [i.e., widowed], and the virgin, is concerned about the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and spirit;

What about younger widows? Paul addresses them—but not exclusively—in v9.

v9

But if they do not have self-control, let them marry;

Read 1 Corinthians 7:9.

It would be so pleasant if we could just read a verse then go directly to application, because we all can clearly understand what it is saying. Sadly that is rarely the case, so I guess my job is secure. There are a couple of things that require clarification in v9. Once again we have one of those mystifying situations where virtually all the common versions have translated a phrase in a way that most commentators agree is incorrect. How this happens I do not know.

The NASB is the only version that gets close to the correct translation: "But if they do not have self-control..." A. T. Robertson and *Young's Literal* translate this, "But if they have not continency..." The other common translations use the word "cannot," (NIV: "[But if they cannot control themselves...](#)") which speaks of an unsuccessful effort to control one's sexual drive. See the difference? Paraphrasing, the incorrect translation says, *If you are trying to bridle your sexual urges and failing*, while the correct translation says, *If you do not have the gift of celibacy...*

If one does not have the gift of celibacy, then marriage is the solution. It is a small nuance, but this refers not to the act of getting married, but to the married state. Paraphrasing again, *If you do not have the gift of celibacy, be married. Why?*

for it is better to marry than to burn with passion.

The apostle is setting out a hierarchy of ideals concerning our relationships with each other. He speaks of that which is “good”—the ideal state is one of single celibacy, living a life wholly dedicated to God without the responsibilities of a family, and sharing one’s affections with someone other than the Lord.

But not all are so gifted, which is why God created marriage. It is not a sin to have sexual desires and to want to be married. It is a sin—or at least sets one up to sin—to have sexual desires and instead of marrying to burn. The text is vague; Paul is not explicit on what he means when he writes, “to burn.” But there is good evidence that what is meant is “to be aflame with passion.” This metaphor was so common in the literature of that time that he did not need to expand on what he meant; his readers would know.

CONCLUSION

Verses 8 and 9 are addressed to individuals of either sex who have lost their mates through death. In keeping with what he has said thus far, Paul’s counsel is that they remain unmarried, so that they might devote themselves to the Lord. If they are still young, or if at any age they still have sexual desire burning within, they are to marry. From God’s perspective, what is the “why”? We find it down below. Earlier we read v34; now let’s read the whole paragraph.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:32-35.

When queried by the Pharisees,

“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law? [Jesus answered,] “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets.” (Matthew 22:37-40)

This world throws up many obstacles to such incredible devotion, and some, like marriage, are even sanctioned by God. But given the opportunity—given the spiritual gifts He has or has not granted us, given the situations in which He has placed us, given even the anguish of losing a husband or wife to death—we should embrace the gift and blessing of dedicating “all our heart, all our soul, all our mind” to the Lord our God, serving both Him and our “neighbor” in His name.