

PREFACE

In studying vv32-35 in Chapter Seven, something rare happened in my thought process. When comparing the counsel from NT letters or the teachings of Jesus—that is, God’s counsel put down in writing in the first century—my typical response is to quickly see that the application still holds down through the centuries even into the twenty-first. God’s word is timeless, and His beneficial counsel for believers is timeless. For example, look at what the apostle Paul wrote earlier in this chapter.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:13-14.

He goes on to say, in v16, “For how do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife?” Something mystical and deeply spiritual happens in a home—even one in which there is just one believer. The Lord God and His Holy Spirit have a *foothold* in that household that may just redound to eventual salvation for its other members. This is as true today as it was when Paul first wrote it.

When reading and even rereading our passage for today, however, I found myself repeatedly thinking, *My, how times have changed*. In fact, God’s counsel in this passage remains relevant and applicable, but whereas some earlier passages seemed to be holding up a bright and shining mirror to our own times, now, in vv32-35, that mirror casts a more shadowed reflection.

As we will see, however, my initial reaction to this passage was based on forgetting, if just for a moment, that when Paul—that is, God—says “unmarried,” he does not mean just single, but *celibate*. Keeping that in mind brightens up the surface of that mirror and, as usual, gives us strong counsel even for today.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:32-35.

v32A

But I want you to be free from concern.

One gets the impression from the letters of Paul that he enjoyed words, the sound of them, their texture, for he uses and reuses them, sometimes in an almost alliterative sense, repeating not just the words themselves, but employing other words that (in the Greek) sound similar. For example, one day, while he was writing his next letter to the Corinthians he camped out for an entire paragraph on the word *paraklesis*: translated “comfort,” or “encourage.”

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all **comfort**, who **comforts** us in all our affliction so that we will be able to **comfort** those who are in any affliction with the **comfort** with which we ourselves are **comforted** by God. For just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our **comfort** is abundant through Christ. But if we are afflicted, it is for your **comfort** and salvation; or if we are **comforted**, it is for your **comfort**, which is effective in the patient enduring of the same sufferings which we also suffer; and our hope for you is firmly grounded, knowing that as you are sharers of our sufferings, so also you are sharers of our **comfort**. (2 Corinthians 1:3-7; emphasis added)

The apostle does a similar thing in our passage, this time with the word *merimnao*, used in both a positive and negative sense, translated “concern” or “anxious.” Then at the beginning of v34 he chooses a word that *sounds* like *merimnao*: the Greek *memeristai*, translated “divided” in the non-KJVs, which is from the same Greek root as “concern” or “anxious.” This can’t be an accident; Paul loved words, and he had a gift for employing them to great effect.

While not entirely wrong, the KJVs give, I believe, a misleading impression with, in the NKJV, “But I want you to be without care,” as if Paul were saying that he wished they could live free from all worldly cares. But that is not what this passage is about, nor is it necessarily an argument for or against marriage. In the rest of the paragraph Paul fleshes out what he means by this opening statement, but it also flows out of the context of the *previous* paragraph.

Paul is speaking here, as he did in the previous paragraph of the believer’s state of mind. He is telling us to go ahead and live in the world, use its resources, be a part of it, make use of what it has to offer because God has created it for us; to be married or remain celibate. But we are to always remember that this world is just a way-station for the Christian. Our focus is always to be on the world to come and its Lord, rather than on the things—the anxieties—of *this* world.

Gordon Fee: Paul’s concern most likely still has to do with living in the present age as an eschatological person. That is, because life is determined by one’s new existence in Christ...the believer should be free from the anxiety-ridden existence of those who are determined by the world in its present form.

v32B-34A

One who is unmarried is concerned about the things of the Lord, how he may please the Lord;

Here is the gateway to my initial reaction of *My, how times have changed*. Admittedly, it has been quite a few decades since I was “unmarried”—approaching five decades, to be precise—but as I recall, at the time I was less concerned with the “things of the Lord” than I was panting after my betrothed.

But, of course, Paul does not have in mind the male of the species who is desperately *looking* for a wife, or one who is in desperate anticipation of *having* a wife, and especially not the lovable but libidinous rogue in search of anything *but* a wife, but the male of the species who is a spiritually enabled celibate. He is the one who is free to—and has the God-given ability to be—free from sexual desire, free from the (not unpleasant) burden of caring for a wife and family, thus free to devote far more of his life to the Lord—he is not “divided,” as it were (v34a).

With the second part of v32 Paul returns to a comparison of the unmarried with the married, beginning with the men (to v34a), then addressing the women (v34b). Although there are different interpretations—indeed, translations—of this, probably the best is to see that Paul is not saying that one condition is superior and one inferior—or one is sin and one is not (being married or unmarried), but that in either condition he desires that believers have “undistracted devotion to the Lord” (v35)—which is always Paul’s highest ideal.

but one who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how he may please his wife, and his interests are divided.

Let us first consider what Paul is *not* saying. In Jesus’ parable of the sower we have a worst case scenario.

Read Matthew 13:22.

This is a picture of someone whose devotion to the world has overwhelmed his devotion to Christ. He has heard and, perhaps, even believed the gospel, but the incessant corruption of the world—and the man’s lingering dedication to it—has choked out his faith, so that he bears no fruit.

This is not the picture in First Corinthians. Paul is not being critical of the man who marries, but simply stating reality. The married man takes on extra responsibilities unknown to the celibate, so, as he states at the beginning of v34, the man’s interests—and specifically, his devotion—are divided. His faith in Christ is intact; he has not let the world extinguish his love for the Lord. He simply has other responsibilities—wife, family, home—that subdivide his devotion in practical ways. Although not a man nor a marriage, the classic illustration of this is the picture we have of the two sisters, Mary and Martha.

Read Luke 10:38-42.

Mary chose to sit at Jesus’ feet and listen to His every word—*that* was the “good part.”

The call to every believer is to live other-worldly—in this context, eschatologically—whether married or not. Paul’s earnest desire for the Corinthian men is that they would live free from the concerns of this world—ideally as an unmarried celibate, wholly devoted to the Lord, but at least as a husband and father who does not let the burdens of *this* world distract him from the joys of the next.

This potential conflict can only be comprehended when one understands that the believer’s eternal life has already begun. Our life on this soil is not as if we were sitting in a waiting room listening to insipid Muzak, cooling our heels until the big day arrives and we get to go to heaven. That is not the biblical picture of the Christian’s life. Rather, we are already on the Lord’s “Highway of Holiness” ([Isaiah 35:8](#)), traveling onward and upward *through* our sanctification on our way to heaven. In His high priestly prayer in Matthew 17 Jesus defined eternal life for us. He said,

“Father, the hour has come; glorify Your Son, that the Son may glorify You, even as You gave Him authority over all flesh, that to all whom You have given Him, He may give eternal life. [\[and what is eternal life?\]](#) This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.” (John 17:1-3)

It is *while* we are on this earth that we come to know, to understand, to perceive (Greek, *ginosko*) God the Father and His Son. And through that learning we then devote our lives to Them. There will inevitably be earthly distractions to that devotion—even for the celibate, but more so for the husband and father. But we should not get lost in the contrast between the two; the ultimate message of this passage—for married and unmarried, for men and women alike—is that we all strive for “undistracted devotion to the Lord.”

To that end, let us all personalize the powerful, eloquent, passionate prayer of the apostle Paul for the Ephesians.

Read Ephesians 3:14-21.

No matter our station in this life, no matter our marital status, no matter how many burdensome responsibilities we must address while we walk this soil, let us determine to know and hence serve the One who has granted us the privilege of knowing Him.