

PREFACE

Read 1 Corinthians 7:32-35.

Before we return to our passage in Chapter Seven, it will be worth our time to revisit a few key points from our session on “Discrepancies.” In v34, which we will study today, there are two discrepancies that we need to address.

v34a

NASB, NIV, ESV: “...and his interests are divided” (which completes the thought in v33);

KJVs: “There is a difference between a wife and a virgin.”

v34b

NASB: “The woman who is unmarried, and the virgin,”; NIV: “An unmarried woman or virgin”; ESV: “And the unmarried or betrothed woman”

KJVs: “The unmarried woman cares about the things of the Lord”

These segments obviously reflect more than just differences of opinion on how to translate a given Greek word or phrase; they represent utterly different (in this verse) source material. In that earlier session I said,

Over recent centuries there have been a number of scholarly efforts to accurately compile and refine these early manuscripts into a cohesive version of the NT Greek. [(I liken it to our annual income tax preparation process.) This set of scholars over here, another set of scholars over there, doing their own compilations—putting in order the thousands of Greek fragments from the many “shoeboxes”—not translating, but simply compiling a cohesive, one-package Greek NT.] Very often—but not always—the discrepancies we discover between our modern translations can be traced back to the translators working from different versions of these Greek compilations.

Since I do not have the scholarship or training to ferret out on my own which is best from the original Greek manuscripts, I follow my customary procedure of first examining the various translations to see which, based on the context, make the most sense. So I begin by comparing the translations, drawing from my own experience in study. Then I read and compare respected commentators—those who *do* have the scholarship and training. When two or more of these are in general agreement, this makes my task easier; when all disagree with one another (as sadly they do on occasion), my task is made more difficult.

Concerning the passage before us, we can see that with only minor variations, three of our common translations—NASB, NIV, and ESV—are on one side of the ledger, with the two King James translations—KJV, NKJV—on the other.

In this instance the discrepancies we see in our text, from here and into the next paragraph, stem primarily from the translators using different manuscripts (in my vernacular, “compilations”) combined with the sheer difficulty of the Greek. The venerable M. R. Vincent says, “The textual question here is very perplexing, and it is well-nigh impossible to explain the differences to the English reader.” And A. T. Robertson says, “The text here is very uncertain, almost hopelessly so.”

Since we are not translators but students, and since as students we must decide between the two, we can take confidence in the fact that the most recent scholarship and translations, along with the two principal commentators I am using—Gordon D. Fee and David E. Garland—all agree that the beginning of v34 completes the thought about the man in vv32-33 with “and his interests are divided,” rather than beginning a new thought about women with “There is a difference between a wife and a virgin.”

But as discussed in that earlier session, none of this challenges established doctrine or contradicts earlier Scripture—and, of course, we cannot disagree with the alternate translation: There is *indeed* a difference between a wife and a virgin!

v34B

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

Then we are faced with a second discrepancy, because here is where the preferred translation places the Greek *parthenos*, here translated “virgin.” But there remain differences even between the preferred translations. We must decide: Does Paul refer to two different subjects for the verb (NASB: “unmarried, and the virgin,”) or is it just one subject described in two ways (NIV: “an unmarried woman or virgin”)?

Although John MacArthur takes the position that “unmarried” in v34 refers to divorced women, the better interpretation (Fee, Garland) is that it refers to widows, and that “virgin” refers to those who have never married—especially the young and betrothed (ESV).

Sidebar: We will take the stance that Paul is addressing two of the three categories he has used in this chapter to refer to what we would lump together in our vernacular as the “unmarried: “unmarried” (*agamos*), “widows” (*chera*), and “virgins” (*parthenos*). Look at v8; there we determined that Paul was employing *agamois* (plural “unmarried”), to refer to widowers—that is, in v8 Paul is addressing both men and women who have lost their mates from death. As in our own time, *agamos* was a catch-all word used in the *koina* period for anyone not married, but context suggests that in v8 it should refer to males who have been “de-married.” Since Paul specifies “woman” in v34, then here it would be widows.

Taking the long view, in v34b Paul is simply doing what he has all along: address men and women alike. So in vv32-33 he speaks to men, and in v34 he speaks to women. But the second is not a mirror image of the first.

men: “...how he may please the Lord”

women: “...that she may be holy in both body and spirit”

The case can be made that this just represents two ways of saying the same thing. How do we please the Lord? By living in such a way that we are holy inside and out.

but one who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how she may please her husband.

The second portion of what Paul says about women *is* a mirror image of that said about men. The married woman *is*—no harm, no foul—*is* concerned about pleasing her husband. She has more things on her plate than the celibate widow or virgin.

Paul is speaking *practically* here. We know from the previous passages in Chapter Seven that Paul sees his own situation and lifestyle—i.e., single and celibate—as the ideal, because it affords unfettered devotion to the Lord. But it is nothing new or surprising that any man or woman with a spouse and family is going to be “divided” in his or her responsibilities or affections. In v35 he goes out of his way to assure the Corinthians that in none of this does he mean to put pressure on them to live one way or another.

v35

This I say for your own benefit; not to put a restraint upon you, but to promote what is appropriate and to secure undistracted devotion to the Lord.

With v35 Paul accomplishes two things: First, he closes out the argument he has been making since v29, that even while believers are living out their daily lives here on this earth, they are to be thinking and living with a view to the return of Christ and His final judgment. Those belonging to Christ are to tread this earth lightly; their true home is with Him, their true devotion is to be for Him.

Second, v35 transitions into his concluding paragraph regarding behavior that is appropriate and well-ordered toward and for the virgin.

Let me point out just a couple of textual details before we summarize what Paul has been saying, and then bring it home for us. The word translated “restraint,” “restrict” (NIV), “snare” or “leash” (KJVs, and most literal), *brochos*, is a colorful word that in ancient writings was used metaphorically as an image of a noose or snare around the neck, and literally in the context of a battle. So the picture is of one being restrained by a rope around the neck. Paul uses it here in the negative; this is *not* his intent.

Euschemon (yoo-skhay'-mone), translated “appropriate,” “proper” (NKJV), “comely” (KJV), “good order” (ESV), Paul will use later in Chapter Twelve, where he uses the human body as a metaphor for the body of Christ.

Read 1 Corinthians 12:21-24a.

...and our **less presentable** members become much **more presentable**, whereas our **more presentable** members have no need of it. (1 Corinthians 12:23b-24a)

Finally, the word translated “undistracted devotion,” literally means “good sitting beside.” Remember the image of Martha’s sister Mary, sitting at Jesus’ feet intently listening to every word He said; by extension this includes not just listening, but being there, alongside, ready to serve.

The standard interpretation of this verse—especially in Catholic quarters—has been that here Paul is reaffirming the requirement of celibacy for “undistracted devotion” to the Lord (KJV: “that ye may attend upon the Lord without distraction”). Hence the requirement for celibate priests, whether or not they have been granted that gift.

But that really is not what Paul is saying here. He began this paragraph by stating his purpose: “I want you to be free from concern/anxiety,” and we could extend that statement with ...*about the things of this world*. “For,” as he closed the previous paragraph, “the form of this world is passing away.” Don’t put your hope in this world, don’t find your joy in this world, don’t depend on this world, but put your hope, your trust in the returning Lord. In *Him* is true joy.

Here’s is Paul’s overarching point: If you can give the Lord Jesus undistracted devotion as a single celibate, and you have that gift from Him, then I believe that to be the best. But if you haven’t that gift, and can serve the Lord and be devoted to Him wholeheartedly, effectively, while married, then that is good as well. Only because you are married, your devotion will, by necessity (in most instances), be “divided.” Regardless your gifts and marital status, however, as you live *in* this world, live *for* the next.