

PREFACE

Since April 7 of this year we have been studying Chapter Seven. On that first day I offered two reasons for approaching this chapter with fear, trembling, and humility:

1. Portions of it would be challenging to understand and interpret—especially when we, sadly, have been and continue to be daily schooled in our modern, fallen, culture. This would be a portion of Scripture in which it is easy to respond with, “Oh, surely he does not mean *that*.”
2. The one teaching this portion of Scripture would be 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.

For the last five months we have accepted the challenge of Chapter Seven and examined it with unblinking allegiance to the authority of God’s word. Some of it made us a little uncomfortable; some made us a *lot* uncomfortable. But we soldiered on. Now we have reached the last two verses, which we will look at later.

But first it will be worth our time, before we proceed into Chapter Eight (which, by the way, has its own challenges), to review Seven’s essential teachings. We have spent much time down in the weeds of this chapter, and perhaps some of us have lost sight of the big picture—or worse, we may have allowed the pervasive culture of this world to creep back in to soften some of its more tough counsel.

REVIEW

One aspect of Chapter Seven that makes us so uncomfortable is that it delves into the most personal area of our life: that which happens behind closed doors. In that sense the topic really begins in the middle of Chapter Six, with v9.

Read 1 Corinthians 6:9-11.

Paul then finishes Chapter Six by addressing the horror of married Christians visiting prostitutes.

Read v15.

Although the subject matter of Chapter Six flows effortlessly into the next chapter, Chapter Seven begins a new section in the letter, with Paul answering specific concerns of the church sent to him by letter. And for his answers Paul draws from several kinds of authority:

- the teachings of Christ Jesus (e.g., v10);
- his (Paul’s) authority as a called apostle of Christ (e.g., v25);
- the counsel of the Holy Spirit working within him (e.g., v40).

On these authorities—which really are just one: the authority of God—Paul addresses issues in the Corinth church dealing with the married and formerly married, widows and widowers, abstinence within marriage, divorce, the single life, and virgins.

There are two overarching themes that run through the entire chapter. Although the apostle allows for exceptions and circumstances—that is, he does not command it—he consistently counsels two best solutions to their questions: one a practical plan, the other an essential mindset.

A Practical Plan

By my count Paul states twelve times in this chapter, in so many words, that the best plan is for everyone to “remain in that calling in which [they] were called.” In this he is simultaneously referring to one’s situation when called *and* to God’s call itself. It sanctifies that situation as a place where one can truly live out God’s call in the present age (Fee). The Lord may move you about or change your circumstances, but wherever and whatever you are, remain faithful in service and obedience to the Lord God who bought you and called you.

A Mindset

To remain as and where one is is a sturdy principle for right “now,” but it is based on a mindset focused on the “not yet” of God’s *eschaton*. “The Greek language uses the word *eschatos* to designate the end-point of a continuously conceived succession of circumstances” (Brown). “Eschatology” then refers to the doctrine of the last things—the end times as designed and planned by the Godhead before time began—the return of Christ, the Day of Judgment, the establishment of His kingdom on earth, followed by creation of the New Heaven and New Earth.

Throughout Chapter Seven Paul has repeatedly—again, in so many words—expressed his desire for those in the Corinthian church to live as eschatological people: living by necessity in the here and now, but seeing and thinking about *this* world from the perspective of the next.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:29-31.

Christ—His coming, His gospel, His death and resurrection, His salvation—has now “compressed” time “in such a way that the future has been brought forward so as to be clearly visible, not so much with regard to its timing as to its reality and certainty” (Fee).

Believers who apprehend this view, that they have a definite future and see it with a supernatural clarity, live in the here and now with radically altered values as to what counts and what does not (Fee).

When we studied this passage I suggested a way to imagine it: The rest of the fallen world sees eternity as if through the wrong end of a telescope: far, far away, tiny and insignificant. Christians, however, see eternity as if through the correct end of binoculars; because we can see and know the eternity before us in Christ, it seems closer to us—as if we can reach out and touch it.

If there is only one thing you take away from Chapter Seven this would be it: to live *in* this world, but live *for* the next—even as regards our most intimate relationships.

A Counterfeit Spirituality

Throughout Chapter Seven—indeed, the entire letter—Paul is battling a pervasive culture that is pulling the church in an unhealthy direction. Under the guise of a counterfeit “spirituality,” they are being told (among other things) that the body means nothing; because the spirit is everything, what one does with the body is immaterial. This was producing even within the church the bizarre practice of married couples abstaining from sex (because they were too “spiritual” for that) but then visiting temple prostitutes (because what they did with their body meant nothing). This is why it was necessary for Paul to remind them, in Chapter Six, that the body does indeed count for something.

Read 1 Corinthians 6:19-20.

When one combines these two realities for the Christian—the body being a temple for the Holy Spirit, and the supernatural oneness of the bodies of a married man and woman—we are presented with an amazing illustration of God’s extraordinary intimacy with His people.

No Abstinence within Marriage

The apostle opens Chapter Seven with the same topic that he closed Chapter Six: the body. Only now he places it in the context of this Corinthian notion that it is more “spiritual” for married couples to abstain from sexual relations. Not only does he declare (in two different ways in vv2-3) that the man and woman are to enjoy the marital bed, but he follows this with a statement of mutual but reciprocal authority over the body of one’s spouse.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:4.

His allowable exception to this rule is that from time to time the couple could—only by mutual consent—abstain from sexual relations for a brief period of intensified prayer (much as one abstains from eating during a religious fast).

In v1 Paul quotes back a common slogan or maxim in the Corinthian church that was probably stated in their letter to him: “It is good for a man not to touch [i.e., have sexual relations with] a woman.” We learn from Chapter Seven that Paul does not necessarily disagree with this—but he strongly disagrees with their *reason* for holding this position. They 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.

The apostle repeats several times in this chapter that he believes the preferred lifestyle for a devoted follower of Christ—one that will better facilitate a life given wholly to Him—is a lifestyle like his: single and celibate. But this is not the forced celibacy that the Corinthians were espousing, but celibacy as a gift from God. Without that spiritual gift, his clear counsel is for them to be married.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:8-9.

On Divorce

Perhaps the most uncomfortable portion of Chapter Seven for some deals with the issue of divorce, which is concentrated in vv10-16. Paul’s counsel begins with Christ’s position, and then he fleshes this out by his own apostolic authority. We can summarize it this way:

- If you are married, stay married. Only death can break the marriage covenant.
- If one *does* leave they must remain single (and celibate) or reconcile; to remarry is adultery (Matthew 5:31-32).
- A Christian should only marry another Christian (v39), but if one (only) in a marriage becomes a believer after they are married, the believer should not divorce the unbelieving spouse. Not only does this leave the door open for the believing spouse to witness to the unbelieving spouse, but the family and home is “sanctified” by the presence of the one believer.
- However, if the unbeliever *chooses* to leave, the believer should let him or her, rather than force them to stay.

An Interlude

Paul bolsters his counsel and commands with an off-topic interlude—off-topic only in the sense that it is about circumcision and slavery, rather than marriage and home life—in vv17-24. In this he reinforces his stance on “remain as you are,” using circumcision and slavery to illustrate the point. He will do a similar thing in vv29-31, in the sense that beyond “remain as you are,” Paul is emphasizing that we are not to be concerned about such relative trivialities because “the form of this world is passing away” (v31).

Concerning Virgins and the Betrothed

Near the end of the chapter Paul addresses, specifically, young men and women who are betrothed, or men who may be considering becoming betrothed to a virgin. He really does not break new ground here, but simply reiterates what he has been saying all along: If you can, remain single; if you cannot, get married. And there is nothing unexpected in the last two verses of the chapter.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:39-40.

The best interpretation of “only in the Lord” is as the NIV translates it: “but he must belong to the Lord.” That is, Christians should only marry Christians.

The end of v40 is a bit cryptic; the word “also” or “too” may indicate that Paul is answering those who claim, either for themselves or their on-site teachers, that they are more “spiritual,” and hence know better than Paul.

In Conclusion

Chapter Seven puts the lie to the belief (generally by people who don’t read the Bible for themselves) that Paul was a woman-hater and didn’t believe in marriage. If we had only this chapter from Paul we would know that he considered men and women, husbands and wives, to have equal rights and worthy of respect. And when it was the appropriate path for a man and woman, based on their God-apportioned gifts, he encouraged them to get married. If they had the gift of celibacy, then he encouraged them to remain single.

But throughout the length and breadth of this important chapter Paul’s essential and overriding concern may be summarized by v35 (along with the two mentioned at the top). Here we have the apostle’s foundational “why” for everything he has been saying.

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.

There is his motive; there is his prayer for all the Corinthians as well as every believer today, that we would live lives that are “appropriate,” proper, and with “undistracted devotion to the Lord.”