

BIBLICAL GUIDELINES CONCERNING MARRIAGE AND THE SINGLE STATE

7 Now concerning the matters of which you wrote. It is good for a man not to marry. ²But since there is so much immorality, let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband. ³The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife [should fulfill her duty] to her husband. ⁴The wife's body does not belong to her [alone], but also to her husband; and likewise, the husband's body does not belong to him [alone], but also to his wife. ⁵Do not deprive each other [of sexual relations] except by mutual consent for the purpose of devoting yourselves to prayer, [and only] for a short time. Then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. ⁶[I give this instruction] as a concession, not as a command. ⁷I wish that all men were as I am; but each one has his own gift from God, one has this gift, another has that one. ⁸[My counsel] to the unmarried and widows is that it is good for them to remain as I am—[single]. ⁹But if they are unable to exercise self-control, let them marry; for it is better for them to marry than to burn [with sexual desire].

¹⁰Now to those who are married I give this command—not I, but the Lord—a wife should not leave her husband. ¹¹But if she is forced to leave, let her remain unmarried or [else] be reconciled to her husband—and a husband must not divorce his wife. ¹²To the others I, not the Lord, [give these instructions]: If any [Christian] brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, but she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. ¹³And if any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, but he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce her husband. ¹⁴[I say] this because the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the [believing] wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the [Christian] brother; otherwise your children would be unclean, but now they are holy. ¹⁵But if the unbelieving spouse wants to leave, let him leave; the [Christian] brother or sister is not bound under such circumstances, [for] God has called us [to live] in peace. ¹⁶How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife? ¹⁷Only let each one live in the social position to which the Lord assigned him and to which God called him—and these are the instructions I give to all the churches ...

²⁵Now with regard to virgins, I do not have any instructions from the Lord; but, as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy, I give this judgment. ²⁶I think that, because of the impending distress, it is good for a man to remain as he is. ²⁷Are you married? Do not seek a divorce. Are you unmarried? Do not seek a wife. ²⁸But if you do marry, you have not sinned; and if the virgin marries, she has not sinned. But [those who marry] will experience a greater degree of tribulation, and I desire to spare you [from this]. ²⁹Now I tell you this, brothers, the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they had none; ³⁰and those who mourn, as if they were not mourning; and those who rejoice, as if they were not rejoicing; and those who purchase [something], as if it were not their possession; ³¹and those who use [the things of] the world, as not being engrossed in them—for this world in its present form is passing away. ³²Now I want you to be free from care. The unmarried man cares about the things of the Lord, how he may please the Lord. ³³But the married man must be concerned about the things of the world, how he can please his wife, ³⁴and [thus his interests] are divided. So also, the woman who is not married and the virgin can care

about the things of the Lord, [such a woman's concern is to be] holy both in body and in spirit. But the married woman must be concerned about the things of the world, how she can please her husband. ³⁵Now I am saying these things for your benefit, not to put a restriction upon you; on the contrary, [I am saying these things] for the sake of what is proper and [what will promote] undistracted devotion to the Lord.

³⁶If anyone thinks he is not behaving properly towards the virgin [to whom he is engaged], if he has an uncontrollable passion for her and so wants to be married, let him do what he desires, let them marry—he is not sinning. ³⁷But he who is firmly resolved in his own heart not to marry the virgin [to whom he is engaged]—not [feeling] a necessity [to get married], and having his [sexual] desire under control, and having determined this in his own heart—he is doing a good thing. ³⁸So then, the man who marries the virgin [to whom he is engaged] is doing a good thing; but the man who does not marry is doing a better thing.

³⁹A woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to marry whomever she desires—[but] only in the Lord. ⁴⁰Yet in my judgment she will be happier if she stays as she is, and I think that I also have the Spirit of God. (1 Cor. 7:1-17, 25-40)

Introduction

Should Married Women Date? That was the headline over one of newspaper writer Ann Lander's columns. The column itself featured responses from her readers to this question.

A reader from Louisiana wrote: "I am an adult who is free to have lunch with any friend I choose, regardless of age, sex, race, creed or marital status."

A reader from Maine wrote: "A genuinely loving relationship is one in which both parties have full freedom and independence—no questions asked. To deny one's partner access to love, in any of its myriad forms, is to deny that individual personhood."

Then there was the reader from Louisville who wrote: "I have a simple solution for the woman whose husband resents her dating a guy she met in class. She should find a nice girl, nine years his junior, for him to date."

Our contemporary society is very disoriented and confused: in some cases married people are "dating" other persons as though they were still single, and in some cases single people are living together as though they were married. So much of contemporary society is influenced by the philosophy of self-orientation and self-fulfillment, with little regard for moral purity and the sanctity of marriage. But our calling as Christians is to be Christ-centered and to have a very high regard for moral purity and the sanctity of marriage. In order to live productive and holy Christian lives, we must be careful to heed the biblical guidelines concerning marriage and the single state.

I. The Biblical Counsel to the Married: Fulfill Your Marriage Vows (7:1-7,10-17)

As a safeguard against fornication, the apostle exhorts, *“let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband”* (vs. 2.) Note: Throughout this passage of 1 Corinthians 7 the Apostle Paul is emphasizing the sexual aspect of marriage, but in the light of Ephesians 5:22-33, we must understand that he is not depreciating marriage to merely an acceptable outlet for sexual release and fulfillment:

Wives, submit to your own husbands as to the Lord, ²³because the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, he being the savior of the body. ²⁴But as the church is in submission to Christ, so also wives ought to submit to their husbands in all things. ²⁵Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, ²⁶so that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her with the washing of water by the word—²⁷so that he might present the church to himself in glory, without blemish or wrinkle or any [other] such thing, but being holy and blameless. ²⁸Likewise, husbands ought to love their own wives as [they love] their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹No one ever hated his own flesh; rather, he nourishes and cares for it, just as Christ [cares for] the church, ³⁰because we are members of his body. ³¹“For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” ³²This is a profound mystery, now I am speaking about Christ and the church. ³³Nevertheless, let each one of you love his own wife just as [he loves] himself; and let the wife respect her husband. (Eph. 5:22-33)

According to verse 3, within the marriage bond, each partner is responsible to fulfill his or her obligations to their spouse. The obligation the apostle emphasizes here is primarily the sexual obligation: each partner must seek to meet the other’s sexual needs, so as to avoid causing their spouse to become especially susceptible to the temptation of committing fornication. Note: The view expressed in verse 1, *“It is good for a man not to marry,”* is literally, *“It is good for a man not to touch a woman.”* This may have been a view held by some of the Corinthian Christians who were wrongly applying it to marriage; consequently, those who were married were now practicing their own form of asceticism. They were abstaining from sexual relations with their own spouses to devote themselves more fully to the Lord, but by so doing they were causing themselves and their spouses to be especially vulnerable to sexual temptations—the apostle is correcting this misconception and dangerous form of “spirituality.”

Just as verse 3 speaks of a mutual obligation each spouse has to the other, so verse 4 speaks of a mutual submission each spouse must exhibit towards the other: *“The wife’s body does not belong to her [alone], but also to her husband; and likewise, the husband’s body does not belong to him [alone], but also to his wife.”* Within marriage each spouse relinquishes the exclusive rights of his or her body

to the other in a mutual self-giving love. The principle state in Ephesians 5:24-25 is here specifically applied to the sexual relationship: *"as the church is in submission to Christ, so also wives ought to submit to their husbands in all things. ²⁵Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her."*

Based upon his teaching in verses 3-4, the Apostle Paul gives the command: *"Do not deprive each other [of sexual relations]"* (vs. 5.) However, a limited form of sexual abstinence is permissible under strict guidelines: There must be mutual consent by both partners. This abstinence must be only *"for a short time,"* (i.e.; a brief and specified period of time, as opposed to a lengthy and undetermined period of time.) This period of abstinence is to be for the specific purpose of giving one's self to prayer, (perhaps there is a specific need for prayer, maybe an important family decision to be made, or a special burden the family is encountering, so the couple decides to spend a period of time devoted to prayer with regard to this matter. Such abstinence becomes a type of fasting for a limited period of time, allowing the couple to give themselves whole-heartedly to the ministry of prayer. Following the conclusion of the specified time of abstinence, the couple must come together again and resume normal sexual relations so as not to be tempted to fornication.

Referring to this counsel, Paul makes clear in verse 6 that it is given only as a concession, or suggestion, and not as a commandment. The counsel given in verse 5 is not mandatory, it is merely offered as godly guidance. As verse 7 indicates, it is precisely because abstinence is a gift of God, (as is also marriage,) a gift given to some but not to all, that Paul's counsel in verse 5b is only submitted as guidance or suggestion and not presented as a commandment that all Christians must obey.

In verses 10-11 the Apostle Paul gives biblical counsel to those married couples who find themselves contemplating separation or divorce. The Greek word, γαμέω, "to be married," occurs in the perfect tense, which signifies a continuing or permanent condition and which might literally be translated, *"those who are in the married state."* What is being emphasized here is the binding nature of the marriage relationship, as first ordained by God: *"a man shall leave his father and his mother and shall be bound to his wife; and they shall be one flesh"* (Gen. 2:24.)

Paul indicates that the instruction he is about to give is from the Lord. That is to say, he is here repeating what the Lord Jesus taught during the time of His earthly ministry and what is recorded in the gospels, note Mark 10:6-9,

But at the beginning of creation God made them male and female; ⁷for this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, ⁸and the two will become one flesh. So they are no longer two, but one. ⁹Therefore, what God has joined together, let man not separate. (Mk. 10:6-9)

The counsel is that a wife should not leave her husband, but if she is forced to leave she is to remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband (vs. 10b-11a,) and the husband must not divorce his wife (vs. 11b.) Note: Scripture is not condoning what is often termed “legal separation,” a situation in which the husband and wife are separated from one another but not divorced. If a couple were permitted to separate, they would not be able to fulfill their obligations to one another, as specified in 1 Corinthians 7:3. Not to fulfill one’s covenantal vows is tantamount to breaking them. By way of illustration: If you owed car payments to one auto dealer you could not justify non-payment of your debt by assuring him that you were not giving the money owed him to some other auto dealer in town—he would remind you of the fact that you owed the money to him and he has every right to receive it.

Verse 11a is dealing with a situation in which the wife is forcibly put away by her husband—in the event of such a case, the wife should not assume that her husband’s action in itself has the authority to nullify the marriage and thereby make her free to enter into a new marriage, (note again Mark 10:6-9, referred to earlier.) If the wife is able to be content in her “unmarried” state, she should recognize that in this state she is more useful to Christ and can devote herself whole-heartedly in minister to Him and for Him (note verses 32-35.) In light of verses 3-4, the wife would certainly have the right to bring her case before the church to seek aid in reconciling with her husband or else disciplinary action against him for his refusal to keep his covenantal vows and his failure to fulfill his marital duties to his wife. If there be no repentance on his part, it seems that she would be released from the marital relationship, especially in light of 1 Timothy 5:8, *"If anyone does not provide for his own relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever."*

In verses 12-16 Paul supplies biblical counsel for those who find themselves married to an unbeliever. Note: Within the Corinthian church there would have been mixed marriages, (a believer married to an unbeliever,) which would have resulted from one spouse having become a Christian while the other remained an unbeliever—as verse 39 makes clear, it is not permissible for a Christian to marry an unbeliever: *"A woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to marry whomever she desires—[but] only in the Lord."*

In the case where the unbelieving spouse is content to dwell with the Christian, the biblical counsel is for them to remain together. The church must not counsel the believer to leave the unbelieving partner (vs. 12-13)—the church may have been misapplying Paul’s earlier counsel referred to in 1 Corinthians 5:9-11,

I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with fornicators. ¹⁰[I wa]s not [referring] to the people of this world who are fornicators, or who are greedy, or swindlers, or idolaters. [If that were the case,] you would have to leave the world. ¹¹But what I meant when I wrote to you is that you must not associate with anyone who claims to be a [Christian] brother, but is a fornicator, or who

is a greedy man, or an idolater, or a slanderer, or a drunkard, or a swindler. With such a person, [you ought] not to have fellowship. (1 Cor. 5:9-11)

Paul provides the reason and the assurance as to why it is permissible for a Christian to remain in a marital relationship with an unbeliever: the unbelieving spouse has been sanctified by the believing spouse (vs. 14.) This does not mean that the unbelieving spouse has been saved by virtue of the Christian spouse's faith, note verse 16, "*How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?*" Rather, it means that within the marital relationship the spiritual and moral defilement of the unbelieving spouse before God has been nullified by virtue of the believing spouse's relationship to Christ. The principle expressed by our Lord in Matthew 23:17-19, namely, that something or someone is sanctified by coming into contact with that which is holy, seems to be operative here in the case of the kind of mixed marriage found within the Corinthian church. In that passage of Matthew's gospel, our Lord challenged the religious leaders with the question,

"You blind fools! Which is greater: the gold, or the temple that has sanctified the gold? ¹⁸You also say, If anyone swears by the altar, it means nothing; but if anyone swears by the gift on it, he is bound by his oath. ¹⁹You blind men! Which is greater: the gift, or the altar that sanctifies the gift?" (Matt. 23:17-19)

Thus, the believing spouse need not fear that he (or she) or their children are spiritually defiled by their relationship with an unconverted spouse. On the contrary, by virtue of his (or her) faith in Christ and the sanctifying power of that relationship with Christ, the children are holy; (i.e.; they are sanctified, set apart for the LORD, included within His covenant.) In the case where the unbelieving spouse desires to leave the marriage, (by means of divorce or desertion,) the Christian is to allow him (or her) to do so and is under no further marital obligation to their former spouse (vs. 15.)

Note: The significance of Paul's remark, "*I, not the Lord, [give these instructions,]*" stands in contrast to his previous statement made in verses 10-11. In verses 10-11 Paul was conveying to the church the very teaching that the Lord Jesus Himself delivered during His earthly ministry and that is recorded in the gospels. In verses 12-16 Paul is presenting his counsel—but he is speaking in his capacity as an inspired apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ, note verse 40b, where he facetiously declares, "*and I think that I also have the Spirit of God.*" As an apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ it is very evident that he, indeed, does have the Spirit of God, he is speaking under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Paul is being somewhat sarcastic and self-deprecating; he **knows** that as an apostle of the Lord Jesus he has the Holy Spirit and his utterances are inspired by Him, as he will maintain in 2 Corinthians: "*we speak by Christ*" (2 Cor. 12:19) and "*Christ speaks by me*" (2 Cor. 13:3.)

To sum up, the biblical counsel to those who are married is basically this: they are to faithfully fulfill their marital vows.

II. The Biblical Counsel to the Unmarried: Remain Single for the Lord, If Possible (7:8-9,25-40)

Paul's inspired counsel to those who are single or widowed is as follows: it is a good thing if they can remain in their unmarried state (vs. 8.)

The reason why the single state is good and preferable is given in verses 32-35. The one who is unmarried is able to devote himself or herself whole-heartedly to the Lord without distraction or "conflicting" obligations. The one who is married must be concerned to fulfill his or her obligations to their spouse. Again, the apostle makes clear that it is not a commandment that the single and the widowed remain unmarried—he is merely advising what is preferable, if possible.

Paul recognizes that some of those who find themselves in the unmarried state may discover that state to be intolerable for them—if such is the case, they are not only free, but are even urged, to marry (vs. 9.) It is better to marry than to be highly vulnerable to sexual temptations. But the commandment is, let them marry "*only in the Lord*" (vs. 39.) That is to say, let them only marry someone who is a fellow believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, note 2 Corinthians 6:14-16a,

Do not be yoked together with unbelievers; for what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?¹⁵ What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? ¹⁶What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols?—for we are the temple of the living God. (2 Cor. 6:14-16a)

Verse 37 offers some biblical guidelines by which a Christian can examine himself to determine whether or not he or she has the gift of celibacy—the gift of remaining single. The person must be absolutely convinced "*in his own heart*" that he or she is able to live a single, celibate life. He or she has come to this decision on their own, they are not being pressured by someone else to make the choice of remaining single. Their decision is confirmed by the fact that they do not feel "*a necessity [to get married]*" and they have their "*[sexual] desire under control.*" They are convinced that the urge to fulfill sexual desires and/or the need for marital companionship is under control and for them is not an excessive need that must be met.

Throughout this passage Paul emphasizes that celibacy, like marriage, is a gift of God, and only those who possess the gift are able to live the single life. If a Christian does not possess the gift of celibacy, he or she is free, and even urged, to seek Christian marriage.

To sum up, the biblical counsel to the unmarried is basically this: remain single for the Lord's sake, if possible, but only if possible.

Conclusion

Contemporary society is very much self-oriented, showing little regard for either moral purity or the sanctity of marriage. But our Christian calling is to be Christ-centered, and in so doing, to have a very high regard for both moral purity and the sanctity of marriage. In order to live both a holy and productive Christian life, let us be careful to heed the biblical guidelines concerning marriage and the single state.