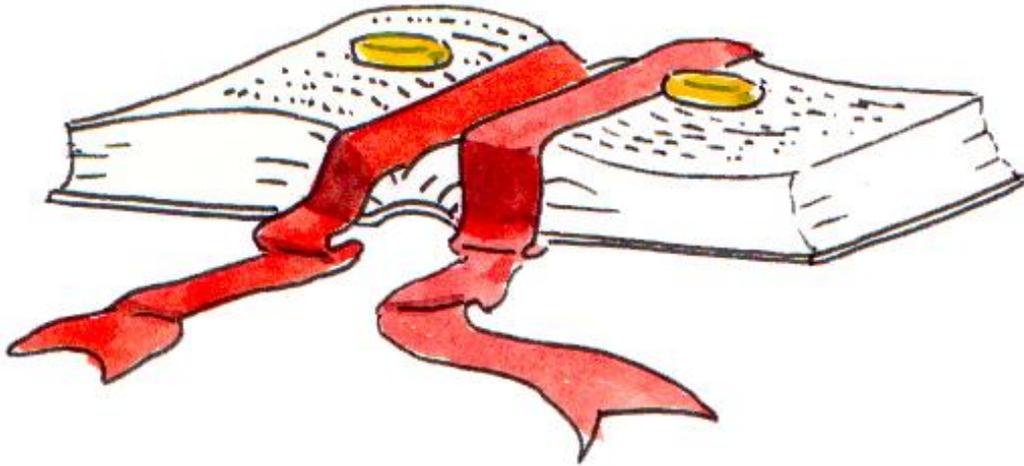


MARRIAGE



AND SINGLENES

*A short series of sermons on the
questions of marriage, and the
advantages of singleness*

by

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preachtheword.com



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Marriage And Singleness - Chapter 1

"Marriage: To Be Or Not To Be?"

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I Corinthians 7:1-7

1. ***Being Single Is Honourable (verse 1)***
2. ***Being Single Is Testing (verse 2)***
3. ***Being Single Is Not For Marriage (verses 3-5)***
4. ***Being Single Is A Gift (verses 6-7)***

First Corinthians chapter 7, and we're taking up the subject tonight of marriage, and we will be spending several weeks - as I've said - on this such important subject in the day and age in which we live. We're looking specifically tonight at: 'Marriage: To Be Or Not To Be, That Is The Question'. Now I want to encourage you, if you know of young married people, or people who are engaged, or people who are contemplating marriage, or people who are single, or even people who are in a situation that they are divorced or separated or going through difficulties, I want you to let them know that these meetings are being held. The beauty of going through scripture verse by verse is that we encounter subjects that aren't too often dealt with, pulled out of the air, when people preach in such a way that they just take up different subjects from week to week - but when we're going through the Scriptures systematically, as we do on a Monday evening, we hit these subjects that are so important, and we're not allowed to just jump over them no matter how difficult they may be, we've got to grapple with them and deal with them, and that's for all of our benefits. Therefore I would like these studies, whether by tape or by inviting people along to these meetings, to go as wide is possible - because it's so important in these days that these particular truths, God's people are hearing them and heeding them.

We're just taking up the first 7 verses of chapter 7: "Now concerning the things whereof ye wrote unto me: It is good for a man not to touch a woman. Nevertheless, to avoid fornication, let every man have his own wife, and let every woman have her own husband. Let the husband render unto the wife due benevolence: and likewise also the wife unto the husband. The wife hath not power of her own body, but the husband: and likewise also the husband hath not power of his own body, but the wife. Defraud ye not one the other, except it be with consent for a time, that ye may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again, that Satan tempt you not for your inconsistency. But I speak this by permission, and not of commandment. For I would that all men were even as I myself. But every man hath his proper gift of God, one after this manner, and another after that".

Sticking out like a sore thumb is the way that many single people feel within the church of Jesus Christ today. I think that's understandable when we consider that much of church life is pro-family, what I mean is that it's architected and engineered in such a way that it provides for family life - and that's only right in the day in which we live, because the majority of homes and nuclei of the population are still families: husbands and wives and, if God blesses them, with children. But the difficulty is that that is not the norm for some people, that is not their experience - and it's not surprising that people who are single, or people who are separated, even people who are divorced, people who have no children even, feel at times that they don't fit in to church life. Let me say that that has perhaps always been the case, but more and more all of us - whether we're married or not married, separated, divorced, single, whatever your situation might be - all of us as Christians are beginning to feel in our society that we don't fit in. All of us don't fit in any more.

It used to be normal to know of marriage enshrined as an institution of society, but that is no longer the case. Before our eyes day by day we continually see in our media how the foundations of the marriage bond are being wrecked and shattered, and there is a monumental attempt to pull down the marriage bond as never there has been before. All of those, no matter what your particular situation might be, who follow the sexual ethics of the Bible, and not of this world and the philosophies of this society, will stick out like a sore thumb. Now I don't want to single anybody out this evening, but whether you're single or whether you're married, or whether you fall into another category that we will deal with in this chapter, the truth of the matter is that no matter how difficult we believe our particular life situation might be, the truth of the matter is: life today for the Christian is difficult, no matter what your circumstances are. It's difficult to live as a Christian full-stop in today's pagan and sinful environment.

Now in chapter 7 through to chapter 11 of 1 Corinthians Paul begins to answer questions that these Corinthians asked him in a letter that they had previously written to him. I can imagine Paul, as he is writing this particular chapter and the chapters that follow, sitting at his desk - if he had a desk - with that letter that the Corinthians wrote to him open in front of him, as he reads down it and answers one-by-one their specific questions. In chapter 7 alone he answers their questions about marriage, about celibacy, about divorce, and eventually widowhood. We'll find as we go through the rest of these chapters that he answers questions on meats that are sacrificed to idols, whether Christians should eat them or not; and there's a great monumental chapter on spiritual gifts, and what gifts we should seek after, and what we should not, and what don't need to be used. We'll see those in the weeks that lie ahead, but in this chapter - and particularly in these first 7 verses - Paul deals with the subject of marriage, but he deals with it in the answer to their question in verse 1: 'It is good for a man not to touch a woman'.

"Concerning the things whereof ye wrote unto me: It is good...". Now they obviously asked the question: 'Is it good for a man not to touch a woman?'. Paul is coming back and answering: 'Yes, it is good for a man not to touch a woman'. He answers this practical question. Now, let me give you a bit of the background to this passage because I believe, perhaps more than any passage in the whole of the New Testament, this particular passage has been misunderstood. Under the Roman law there were four different types of marriage bonds or marriage customs. The first were the marriage of slaves, and slaves were seen in Roman society as sub-human. Therefore they weren't given many of the privileges that the hoy-polloy and the hierarchy of the upper class were given. When they wanted to marry one another, a slave to a slave, they were given what they called 'tent companionship' - in other words, they were permitted to shack up as long as their boss, their master permitted it. Their master, if he agreed to it, allowed them to get together and have 'tent companionship', but because he was their master and they were the slaves he could say at any point when they ought to separate. In fact, he could send one of the partners away, he could tell them to marry another partner, and they would have no say in the matter. He could even sell one of the partners against the will and choosing of the marriage bond.

The fact of the matter is that, as we go through the New Testament, we find that many of the early Christians were slaves, they were not the upper crust of society. So they actually either had lived in this type of lifestyle and married situation, or they were presently living in it as these epistles were written to them. The second type of marriage in Roman society was what was called 'usis', and it was a kind of common law marriage. It said that when you co-habit with someone for at least a year your bond was recognised as a type of marriage. Then there was the third which was called 'coemptio in manum' (sp?) which literally was 'the father of the bride could sell her to whoever had the highest price' - some of you might like that one! He had the prerogative to sell her off to whom he willed. Then there was the fourth, that was the patrician class, the nobility, the upper-class. Their marriage bond took the form of a service, and in fact that particular service is where we derive our modern marriage service from. This might surprise some of you, and I hope it rocks some of you who think you know it all, but the Roman Catholic Church adopted this particular marriage service. Through the Reformation this service largely came unaltered, of course the Catholic Church

Christianised it from its pagan Roman past, but as it comes to us through the reformers and right through to our present modern day it is almost unchanged as we know it as the marriage service.

It involved two families who both organised the event. The bride had a matron of honour, the groom had a best man, they exchanged vows, they gave one another rings - and they were placed on the third finger of the left-hand. The bride had a marriage bouquet and there was a wedding cake - identical, almost, to what we do today. I don't know what that makes you feel about the marriage bond or not, but that's the fact of the matter. What added to the complications in Roman society of the four different types of marriages was that, not only were these marriages common, but divorce was extremely common as well. It wasn't unheard of for people to be divorced as many times as 20 and over! It seems astounding, hardly believable. Also within the society there was an active feminist movement that had developed, and wives were beginning to compete with husbands in the businesses; some of them were even wrestling with their husbands physically as a prowess of strength, feats of physical ability - how would you like to be married to one of them? It seems that no longer had wives any interest in being a housewife, or being a mother - in fact, so much so, that the history books tell us that by the end of the first century childless marriages, by choice, were extremely common. Vows, marriage vows and commitments, began to be ignored more and more.

It's a fact of history, incidentally I would draw your attention and indeed our nation's attention to the facts that lax views in marriage, wherever they are found in societies in history, always eventually lead to social corruption and the state eventually crumbles. When the marriage bond crumbles, the foundations of the state crumble, and I believe it will not be long until our society economically perhaps, certainly politically, perhaps even militarily, will be plunged into chaos - because before our eyes we are seeing the foundations of society being removed.

Now the early church, as you can deduce from all that, had those among them who had these type of backgrounds. Some people who had co-habited, lived together as slaves or in common law marriages, some who had been sold off by their father to the highest bidder, some even in patrician marriage who married the person that they loved and wanted. There were others who were divorced, there were some who were divorced and remarried, I don't know, maybe some who were divorced and remarried maybe 20 times over. So it's hardly surprising when we consider the background all these people who Paul says: 'Such were some of you, but ye are washed, ye are cleansed, ye are sanctified', that these people who lived in this kind of Corinthianised environment could come to the great apostle and say: 'Look, is it not better that people just don't get married?'.

Verse 1: 'Is it not good for a man just not to touch a woman?'. Now you remember in chapter 5 we had the awful occasion of incest, and of a man taking his father's wife, which was his stepmother, and co-habiting and eventually marrying that woman in the assembly. There was this sort of flamboyant disregard to the laws of God, and a liberty that was licence really - they said: 'Because our sins are forgiven we can do whatever we like; because this body isn't worth anything, it's going to die in the grave, well my body wants to do this thing so if it feels good I do it, it's not going to make any difference to my eternal destination'. They were called hedonists, lovers of pleasure. Rather than restraining physical appetites, especially sexual, they satisfied them and they fed them as far as they could to quench them.

Now in chapter 7 we see the opposite extreme, the opposite approach to the difficulties in Corinth which was not to quench and satisfy the appetites in hedonism, but rather to deny the appetites absolutely through asceticism. Rather than saying: 'Well, I'll just satisfy every fleshly lust and appetite that I have', they said: 'We'll deny it, don't even touch a woman, don't go into any physical relationship whatsoever. If the body is evil then they must be evil, and you must abstain from them'. Now Paul comes right away to these young Christians who are saying: 'Well, what's right now?' - they've been converted out of this background - 'I'm not married, should I marry? Sex in my past, sex in Corinth was only filthy, it could come under the

definition of fornication within the word of God, therefore surely it's still evil now after I'm converted?'. Then there were people who were converted whose husbands weren't saved and wives weren't saved, and they were asking the question: 'Well, am I to have unification physically with a person that's not a Christian? That's what I did before I was saved, surely then we should get divorced, or at least we should lived together as a married couple and not enter into the sexual bond?'.

You see the confusion that was going on in this church, that maybe we don't face today - but I'll tell you we're going to face it more and more and we need to grapple with these things. So Paul begins by saying first of all in verse 1: 'Being single, staying not married, not touching a woman, remaining celibate, is honourable'. It is honourable! Now look at that word 'touch' in verse 1, because it's a word that can be misunderstood. It actually is a Jewish euphemism for the sexual act, you can find in the Old Testament and that's exactly what it means. So really we're talking about the sexual bond here, and Paul is saying: 'It's good for a man not to enter into that bond'. The word for 'good' means 'morally excellent, wholesome' - it's a good thing, morally, not to go into this situation. Kenneth Wuest translates it well like this: 'It is perfectly proper, honourable, morally befitting for a man to live in strict celibacy'.

In verse 6 Paul makes this very clear: 'I speak this by permission, not of commandment'. In other words, Paul is not laying down a law here to say that you must be celibate because marriage is bad; neither is he saying you mustn't be celibate because to be celibate is bad. He's saying this: 'I'm saying this not as a commandment given by God, but I'm laying down spiritual principles. I'm not saying marriage is bad, I'm not saying celibacy is always good, but I am saying in answer to your question that to be single and to abstain from sex can be good'. It can be good, it can be honourable.

Now I don't want you to misunderstand anything that I am saying, I certainly don't want you to misunderstand this portion of Scripture - but let me say this: I may be a bit more explicit tonight than some of you would like, but you've got to waken up to the real world in which we live. Our young people are being taught their sexual ethics through the soap operas and through the cinemas and through their schools, and if we don't tell them what the word of God says they will imbibe it and they will have an excuse too, because no one told them any different! Maybe some of us would need to go back to the book and realise that Paul is extremely explicit in some of the things that he says here in this passage. We need to learn them tonight.

Now, right away people pose a question, and we have to answer some of these questions. When Paul says: 'Yes, I agree with you, it's good sometimes for a man not to touch a woman', right away the critics and liberals say: 'Well, Paul is obviously against marriage. Here it is, proof right away'. In verse 7 he says: 'I wish that all men were like myself' - he was single too - and later on he explains why it's good to be single, he would say he feels for him it's better to be single. They all conclude: 'Well, there it is in black-and-white, how can you argue? Paul is against marriage clearly!'. Let me say that Paul categorically is not against marriage, we'll see that very clearly. If you want it proved to you, we turn to 1 Timothy chapter 4, 1 Timothy chapter 4, and he speaks of the falling away and the signs of the last days which will be the apostasy in the church, but also the falling away in society. Chapter 4 of 1 Timothy verse 1: 'Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils; Speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron; Forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from meats'. So to forbid to marry is a mark of the last days apostasy, and Paul would be aligning himself with that if he was saying categorically marriage is wrong and you have to remain single.

Turn to another text, Hebrews chapter 13 this time and verse 4, this is even more explicit, Paul says: 'Marriage is honourable in all, and the bed' - marriage bed - 'undefiled'. It is a holy thing, the physical, sexual marriage bond relationship - and it's Paul, I believe, in Hebrews, because I believe he wrote Hebrews, who says this. But perhaps the greatest commendation Paul gives of marriage is found in Ephesians chapter 5,

turn with me to that, Ephesians 5, because there he actually uses the marriage bond as an illustration of the relationship between the Lord Jesus Christ as the bridegroom, and the church of Jesus Christ as His bride which He bought with His own blood. Verse 22: 'Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body'. So you can see clearly that Paul cannot be, if he's not contradicting himself of course, and he's not, he cannot be against marriage.

So then what does he mean when he says: 'It is good for a man not to touch a woman' in chapter 7 verse 1? Well, first of all you've got to realise that this chapter in Corinthians is not a manual on marriage, it's not an A-to-Z on marriage. It tells us a great deal about marriage, let me say that, but it's not an A-to-Z. It's specifically answering the questions that the Corinthians had about marriage, that must be understood. Also, if you want a panoramic view of what the Bible has to say about marriage you have to take all the verses together, and when you do that as we have done in a measure this evening looking at those three portions, you will realise that marriage is commended by God and all the men of God throughout the canon.

Now, hopefully that's cleared up. But then another question arises, because people ask the question: 'Well, what about Paul? Was he ever married?'. Some people believe he wasn't married; some believe he was a widower, his wife died at some period; some people believe that he was deserted by his wife when he converted to Christianity. The reason why they believe that he was married is because it was Jewish tradition to be married, and it was expected of every pious Jew that he married at the age of 18. Paul boasts on occasions for various reasons, not out of pride, of how he fulfilled all the law and how he fulfilled the orthodox requirements of a strict upstanding Jew in society - and because of that people say that he had to be married to fulfil Jewish tradition. Well, I don't believe that that is proof at all that Paul had to be married, because John the Baptist who was the greatest preacher and prophet ever apart from the Lord Jesus was not married himself, and of course the Lord Jesus was a Jewish bachelor. So I don't think you can use that as grounds, but perhaps one of the more heavier and weightier evidences that Paul was married, they say, is that he was a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling body. Now we don't have time to look at this verse, but in chapter 26 of the Acts of the Apostles in verse 10, Paul tells how when he was persecuting Christians before his conversion, he actually put his voice - and the insinuation is he put his vote - towards their death and their persecution. The only way he could put his vote towards it, is if he was in a voting body and he was a member of the Sanhedrin. People who believe that Paul was married say therefore it's proof, because to be a member of the Sanhedrin: one, you had to be married; and two, you also had to have children. Again I don't believe that proves Paul was married, simply because those rules to be married and to have children to join the Sanhedrin were only introduced as rules in the late first century, perhaps even the early second century, and it was long after Paul died when those rules were brought in.

What do I believe? I don't know, I don't know whether he was married or not. One thing I do think is: if he had been married, he probably would have brought some of his own experiences into the passages where he speaks on the subject of marriage, but he doesn't do that - and again that's not proof, and as far as I'm concerned the jury is still out. But it doesn't really matter, because in chapter 7 what we do know is this, that when he writes these words he isn't married. Now to understand what he means when he says: 'Being single is honourable', we've got to really grasp the problem that there was in Corinth. I can almost see Paul's mind ticking as he writes these words, going back to Genesis 2 verse 18 where God said over perfect creation: 'It is not good that man should be alone', so God created out of man a helpmeet. In the same way as when a man and a woman marries today they become one flesh, the original man and wife were literally one flesh because Eve came out of Adam. So God had pronounced, and Jewish tradition had said throughout all the years, that to be married was good - but it didn't just do that, it went on a little bit further, and he says because God commends it and because God said in Genesis 'Be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth', they went on a step further in extremism and said: 'It is a sin not to be married'.

You see the danger of extremism and taking the Bible a little bit further than it really goes and reading between lines. Nowhere in the Old Testament does the Bible actually require marriage, but the Jews had followed that line. I believe that in Corinth there were Jews who were pushing single people in Corinth to get married again: 'You have to be married! It's a sin not to be married!'. Yet on the other side of the coin there were these dear Greek people who had a background in the paganism of Corinth and all the type of marriage bonds and divorces and ritual prostitution and all the rest that we've looked into in past weeks, and they were looking at their background and saying: 'You can't get married, just don't get married at all, don't get involved with any physical sexual relationships'.

As we've gone through this little book we've found that it's got so much to say to modern, contemporary, urban society that we live in today. You find even within the church that there are the same wings of extremism. They mightn't preach it from the pulpit, but there are people who look down on single people, on unmarried people, as second-class citizens - and some of them will testify that they feel that way. There are some in wider Christendom who believe that not to be married is spiritual, and the Roman Catholic Church in all of its falsehood and blasphemy takes this particular verse and uses it as proof, they say, that men of God like priests ought to be celibate and take a vow of chastity.

There was a monk called Mehilo Tolotos (sp?) and he died at the age of 82 in the year 1938, so we're not going into the dark ages, and it's testified - I find it hard to believe - that he never once saw a woman, never even saw one! His mother died in childbirth, and as soon as that happened he was taken and carried up to a monastery on the peak of a mountain in Greece. There he would live the rest of his life until he died, and he never saw a man, he never saw a woman, he never saw a beast. That monastery operated in that way for 900 years with people who never even looked upon women, because they saw it as very spiritual, as near perhaps as you get to a heavenly life here on the earth! Yet in the false Roman Catholic system you can see both extremes, because for their priests they don't allow them to marry; yet for ordinary people they count it as sacrament to be married! They encourage to be married rather than to be single. There are even states in the United States of America years ago that enforced marriage on their citizens, so the two extremes are not thousands of years back in Corinth as we speak, but they're with us today. There is a danger that we can have in our own preconceived minds: marriage is good, celibacy is bad; celibacy is more spiritual, and marriage is less holy.

Now I want you to see tonight Paul's genius, as he is inspired by the Holy Spirit to clear up this mess and confusion. I wonder how you would handle it? Do you ever wonder at Paul's lack of prejudice? Paul could have sided with the Jews: 'That's right, I know my Torah! I know that the word of God testifies that marriage is good, so I'll side with the Jews and they're right, and you single people ought to all get married'. Because of his upbringing, that's the way he could have got on. Or he could have went with the Greeks because of his own experience - he was single, he could have said: 'I've chosen this for myself because it's best, and I want all of you to do the same. In fact, you have to do the same' - but he didn't. You can see clearly, and I say this to the overseers and to those who counsel people at times, that it is essential in situations like this that you keep your own prejudicial, personal circumstances out of it. No matter what has happened to you, no matter what you have experienced, or your family experiences, you have to plough this middle furrow.

So what does Paul say? He says it is honourable to be single, it may even be desirable to be married, but one is not more spiritual than the other. I hope you can see that that's what he means: 'It is good for a man not to touch a woman', but it is also good, the inference is, to be married. Neither is sub-spiritual or super-spiritual, and the problem in Corinth was not just marriage but it was pride - that was the root of all the problems! They were grasping out at all times, in all of their questions, and in all of their disputes to see ways where they could be more spiritual in the eyes of their brethren over other people, that they could get one over their brother! Do you see that? The lengths that they would go to to look more spiritual!

So the first thing I want you to see is: Paul is saying that singleness, celibacy, is honourable, but so is marriage, and one is not more spiritual than the other. The second thing that we must see is that being single is testing or tempting. It's good, Paul says, but there's temptation involved. 'Nevertheless', verse 2, 'to avoid fornication, let every man have his own wife, and let every woman have her own husband'. This is the danger of being single, especially in Corinth, that you could fall into fornication - and that's what the Roman Catholic Church have fallen into! They haven't seen this, they haven't read on into verse 2, they haven't realised that the sexual desire, when it is unfulfilled, is dynamite - it's so strong that at times it cannot be controlled in that capacity! It's not natural.

Now added to that, the internal problems of passion, is the external problems of attraction and the lust that is all around them. You couldn't walk up High Street in Corinth without right away raising temptation, being face-to-face with some kind of fleshly lust, because licence was the norm of the day - and it's the same today, isn't it? You can't look anywhere, on the television, on a billboard, to a newspaper, without this type of temptation! If you're single, how much harder it is! Paul is warning that to be single is to be tested and to be tempted, and he says that if you're like this and you're burning in passion you should avoid fornication by having your own wife. That sexual frustration, the only way to release it is not in the brothels of Corinth, it's not in looking at pictures, it's not in going with another person, it can only be released in the marriage bond that God has blessed. Now let me say that Paul is not saying that this is the low level that marriage is, he's not suggesting that the only reason to get married with another Christian and look for a spouse is to prevent immorality. He has a very high view of sex as you've seen from these other scriptures, but what Paul is doing is he's being concretely real with the threat that sexual temptation is in the life of a single believer! He's being a realist!

I'll tell you, we need more realists today - not these people that walk with their nose in the air, and you'd think that butter wouldn't melt in their mouth. We need people that will acknowledge their weaknesses, and run from them and help others to do the same - and therefore Paul says: 'If that's you, let every man have his own wife, and every wife her own husband'. Now you will notice, if you're a Mormon, that it's not two wives or five husbands, it's one - one!

You will know, I hope that there are several purposes in marriage and we don't have time to go into them all. The first that we encounter in Genesis is procreation: 'Be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth' - to reproduce and have children. The second is pleasure, and in the book of Proverbs especially and Song of Solomon, the chief among them all, you find that sexual relations are there as a beautiful thing of pleasure, and Solomon tells his son: 'Rejoice in the wife of your youth', and the Hebrew word is 'be exhilarated' in the wife of your youth. The third reason is partnership, a helpmeet, or it could be translated 'a helper suitable for him' - the friendship bond in marriage is a key ingredient to success. But the fourth reason is what Paul is talking about here, not procreation, not pleasure, not partnership, but purity - to remain pure, to be able to protect your body from sexual immorality, and to meet the appetites and physical needs that are natural and God-given in the way that God has ordained. That's the only way!

So Paul is saying, you see the balance here, I wish people wouldn't lift Paul's words and verses out of context and take them to extremes as they so often do. He's saying that although singleness is good, and it's good for a man not to touch a woman, it is not superior to marriage, and there are dangers and perils and temptations in singleness that marriage doesn't have. The third thing you need to notice is that being single is not for married people, it's not for marriage - verses 3 to 5. You might say: 'Well, well done David, that's an obvious one - celibacy is not for marriage'. Well it's not that obvious, you see what you have to remember is there were people here who believed that it was spiritual not to have this physical sexual bond, it was spiritual to remain celibate - but for some of them it was too late, they had already been married maybe before conversion, or after conversion before they had realised this 'high spiritual light and teaching' - it was too late for them to remain single and celibate, they couldn't divorce, therefore they began to behave as celibate in

the marriage bond. Their over-zealousness, their fanaticism and extremism led them to neglect and to deny the needs of their spouse. I think it was probably more common of those people who were converted and their spouse wasn't converted, and they decided: 'Well, I can't sleep with a person that's not a Christian, so I'll remain celibate'. Can you see this?

So they were being single in the marriage bond. Paul said to them, and we'll see it in a later week, verses 10 to 17: 'It doesn't matter whether you're a believer and your wife's a believer, or whether they're a believer and you're not or vice versa, you are not to deprive your husband or your wife of your duty'. God sees marriage as sacred, He sees the sexual union as sacred, He sees it as pure, proper; but He also sees it, Paul is saying, as obligatory - it's a privilege, it's a pleasure, but it is also a responsibility in the marriage bond! People going into marriage have to realise this, that Paul says both have a duty to satisfy each other in this regard, and one wife or husband has no more rights over their spouse. 'Let the husband', verse 3, 'render unto the wife due benevolence' - the word there 'due' is 'duty', in fact it could be literally translated 'debt'. You have a debt to your spouse to satisfy them physically, and vice versa - but notice the emphasis: it is not your right, it's not a right, it's something that you have to seek for them and they ought to seek for you, not in selfish lust but in the giving of Christian love, and it's your debt, it's your duty.

Paul enforces this by saying in verse 4: 'The wife hath not power of her own body', everybody would have said 'Amen' in Corinth, where women were trodden on the ground - but wait a minute, Paul says: 'Neither has the husband authority over his body'. There is equality in marriage you know, there's different roles, but there is equality in Christ of male and female. It's the same in the church, there is neither male nor female, there's different roles. But in this bond you are not your own, and we saw in chapter 6 that strictly speaking the body is for God and we're to present it as a living sacrifice, but in the marriage bond the body is for your spouse, and it's not an optional extra. It's not, let me say, as some believers seem to see it, and I've read some books like this, where it's seen as a necessary evil which spiritual Christians only engage in to produce children - and it's a chore almost!

The same way as marriage is intended to be permanent, so is the bond which is the deepest expression of love on a human level in its beauty and in its power to unite. Paul says in verse 5: 'Don't defraud one another', another translation: 'Stop depriving one another', and it's a command of Scripture as legitimate as any other command that's in the word of God. If you don't like that don't get married, it's as simple as that. Paul says the only exception, here it is, the only exception is if, by consent: 'for a time', verse 5, 'that ye may give yourselves to fasting and prayer', that you separate in this physical capacity. Now we hear a lot about 'consent', don't we, in the age of consent? But we don't hear too much about this type of consent! Where there is a consent between a husband and a wife to separate physically for a period of time is too fast and to pray to God! It's amazing this, it has to be for a specific time, for a specific purpose, and together agreed - and the word, literally, 'agreement' is the word 'symphony'. That is what the marriage bond should be, a physical symphony but also a spiritual symphony - and here's a question for all of us: is there ever a time when you're in your marriage bond that you decide that you're going to have a time of prayer and fasting? When there's a burden that God puts upon you so great for some particular thing, that you've each got the liberty to go away and drop everything and seek God - and I'll tell you, some of the reason why husbands and wives don't go onward and upward with God is because of their husband or their wife holding them back!

Thank God if you've got a good wife - I better say I've got a good one! - but thank God for a good husband that doesn't pull you down to their standards, but pull you up to Christ's standards. This is what Paul is saying: the general rule is that the only time you break away from this physical relationship is to make time to pray, special undivided attention for spiritual things by mutual consent for an important reason for a brief period - but after that, and see this in verse 5, here's the danger, after that: 'come together again, that Satan tempt you not for your inconsistency'. In other words, you know if you've been on a mountaintop experience that that's the time that the devil longs and loves and often does pull you down, and be careful when you

enter out of the spiritual time, when your defences are down and your pride is up, that Satan doesn't enter and you fall into sin - perhaps even sexual sin. The only reason to abstain from this relationship is not to be more spiritual, can I say it's not to use sex as a manipulative tool or a bargaining chip, do you know why? Because you can't bribe someone with something that you owe them. If you're using sex like that in the marriage bond, you're using it as a tool of Satan, you need to know that.

The fourth and final thing is that being single is a gift. Now verse 6 troubles a lot of people and gives them the colly-wobbles, because Paul says that 'I speak this by permission, and not of commandment'. We say: 'Well, there you are, he doesn't even believe himself that he's being inspired, this isn't a commandment!' If you go to chapter 14, don't go to it now, verse 37, he says that all that he's written is inspired of God - so that clears that up right away. What Paul is referring to is not what's commonly thought, what comes in verse 7, he's referring to what he has already said in verses 1 through to 5, that he has spoken by permission and not of commandment. Now what does he mean? He's saying: 'I'm not saying you have to be married, I'm not saying you have to remain single, I'm saying that there are right things for different situations'. Then he goes on in verse 7 to say: 'I wish everybody was like me, because I'm single'. What he's saying is: 'I wish people had the independence I have to serve the Lord, I wish they had the freedom', and in fact we'll see in later studies that in verse 26 he says he wishes that they were single for the present distress that there was. I believe that a lot of complications in this passage, where people think Paul is contradicting himself, can be answered in the fact that Christians were being persecuted - and Paul is saying: 'If you want to help yourself and not get hurt by seeing your wife burnt at the stake, or your children fed to the lions, you'd be better not getting married until all this distress is over'. That clears up a lot of complications when you look at it that way.

But Paul didn't expect people to be just like him, but the point that he is making is: there is not one that is more spiritual than the other. If you're single it is honourable to say single in purity. If you're married it's honourable to stay married in purity. To marry or to not marry is, in Paul's case, a matter of conscience, a matter of circumstances - but here's the main point: it's a matter of gift. I've got people sometimes who come to me, especially young people, and there are a lot more than you would imagine. They're afraid they're going to be left on the shelf, and they feel - particularly young men - that in this area, difficult area, of sexual appetite that they could not remain single for the rest of their days - it's impossible, absolutely impossible. Now I think that if that is the case you do not have a gift that is spoken about here, it is a gift to remain celibate! It's a gift to be married, and the word is 'charisma' which means 'gift of grace' - it's the grace of God that you have a wife or a husband, and it may be the grace of God that has given you a gift to be celibate. But people look at the fact that they're single, and perhaps God has called them to be single - and I'm not saying God has called you to be single - but people look at it as a problem, and Paul says: 'It is not a problem, because if God has given it to you for life or for a particular season, it is a gift!'. It's a gift of grace! It's in God goodness, it's not a consolation prize, it's a high calling and God wants you to embrace it now, and perhaps for the rest of your life if necessary, if He calls you to do so! We'll see in later weeks how you can use this great gift of singleness that God has given to you.

Sure you would know that if you try to use a gift that you don't have that's wrong. If you're trying to be celibate and haven't got the gift, you will end up in frustration and perhaps immorality. Jesus even said that there are some eunuchs that are eunuchs for the kingdom of God, but not everybody can take that command. You can't take it my friend if you can't admit it, but neither is singleness required of God - it's whatever gift you're given. We're going to find out later in Corinthians, when we come to spiritual gifts, that Paul's message is this, and the whole message of the word of God is: discover your gift, be faithful to God in it, and don't envy other people and discredit their gifts. The married were saying: 'You should be married', the unmarried were saying: 'You shouldn't be married'. I don't know where you are this evening.

Amy Carmichael went from Northern Ireland to work in India with girls who were rescued from slavery and prostitution. She raised them in her Donovan (sp?) fellowship, and you would know if you've heard of her, that her life touched thousands of people, her books have blessed millions and are still touching lives today - but as a young girl she was extremely attractive. She wanted to get married, but she knew that her great work for God couldn't be done if she was married, it would be impossible. She had a real struggle with this - I'm not saying you're called to be single, don't get me wrong - but she was, and she struggled and wrestled with it, and it was deeply personal, so much so that she couldn't share it for more than 40 years until she was helping another girl in the same situation. She wrote this in her diaries, listen: 'On this day many years ago I went away alone to a cave in a mountain called Erimah (sp?). I had feelings of fear about the future. This is why I went there, to be alone with God, and the devil kept on whispering: 'It's alright now, but what about afterwards? You're going to be very lonely' - and he painted pictures of loneliness, I can see them still. I turned to my God in desperation and said: 'Lord, what can I do? How can I go on to the end?'. He said to me in the words of Psalm 34:22: 'None of them that trust me shall be desolate'. 'None of them that trust me shall be desolate' - that word has been with me ever since'.

Whatever your gift and calling is, my friend, one thing there is for all of us to do: 1 Thessalonians 4:3-4: 'This is the will of God, even your sanctification, that ye should abstain from fornication: That every one of you should know how to possess his vessel in sanctification and honour'. Do come back next week, we'll be looking at the few verses following from these that speak of the divine principles for marriage. We'll be looking at people who are married to non-Christians, and the situation of peoples whose husband or wife leaves them. We'll be looking at a little bit on divorce and other things, and the principles for a good marriage under God. Then we'll be dealing with singleness again, and how to use your singleness, in a couple of weeks time. So don't forget about these studies, and do come back under the sound of God's word.

Our Father, life is difficult today whether we're married or not. None of us, no matter what we are going through, have a monopoly of pain. Father, with all the effulgence of filth that is around us, many of us have fallen, and many of us will find it difficult to stand as things wax worse and worse. But Lord, we thank Thee that with the promises and the precepts come the power, and we pray that all of us will sanctify the Lord our God in our hearts, and that we will present our bodies in our marriages, in our celibacy, in our singleness - no matter what shape or form it may take - that all our days we will spend and be spent for the Master. Amen.

Transcribed by Andrew Watkins, Preach The Word - February 2003

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Marriage And Singleness - Chapter 2

"Marriage Matters"

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I Corinthians 7:8-16

1. ***Unmarried And Widows (verses 8-9)***
2. ***Divorce (verses 10-11)***
3. ***Mixed Marriages (verses 12-16)***

We are looking tonight at 'Marriage Matters', and we'll be covering quite a bit of ground with many issues related to marriage, but we're beginning our reading at verse 8 of 1 Corinthians and we'll finish at roundabout verse 17 or so.

"I say therefore to the unmarried and widows, it is good for them if they abide even as I. But if they cannot contain, let them marry: for it is better to marry than to burn. And unto the married I command, yet not I, but the Lord, Let not the wife depart from her husband: But and if she depart, let her remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband: and let not the husband put away his wife. But to the rest speak I, not the Lord: If any brother hath a wife that believeth not, and she be pleased to dwell with him, let him not put her away. And the woman which hath an husband that believeth not, and if he be pleased to dwell with her, let her not leave him. For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband: else were your children unclean; but now are they holy. But if the unbelieving depart, let him depart. A brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases: but God hath called us to peace. For what knowest thou, O wife, whether thou shalt save thy husband? Or how knowest thou, O man, whether thou shalt save thy wife? But as God hath distributed to every man, as the Lord hath called every one, so let him walk. And so ordain I in all churches".

Now let me just say that in this evening's study I'll be touching on a number of very controversial subjects. The likelihood is that there will be some of you who will disagree, and disagree profoundly, on some of the things that I will say tonight. That's no surprise, because there are greater and more godly men than I who disagree with what I'm going to teach from the word of God this evening. Let me also say it is not my intention, in any capacity, to offend anyone unnecessarily, to ostracise anyone, to single anyone out or to make them feel uncomfortable. I hope that any of you who know me will know that there is no condemnation in my heart towards anyone. I hope you will take that from my heart, honestly and truthfully, as I express it to you this evening.

But yet, with all of these matters that touch us individually and corporately as families and among our friends with relation to marriage, divorce, widowhood, widowers and so forth; those who are single, and those who are virgins, nevertheless there comes times when we have to set aside our own individual circumstances and not allow them to prejudice how we understand and interpret the word of God. I'm seeking to do that, and I would request that you do it also. The last time I addressed the subject particularly of divorce, when we were going through the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew chapter 5 on Sunday mornings, there was one individual - and he's not here tonight just in case you think you know who it is - but who caught me at the door and said to me: 'You don't realise some of the problems and the suffering and the pain that people who go through these experiences and circumstances have in their lives - for many people who are divorced it's not their fault'. Well, if he had been listening during the course of my message, I outlined the fact that for many people it is not their fault - we live in a day and age where divorce can be forced upon you without your

consent. I did make that known, and I want that to be known tonight. I'm not saying that we have all the answers, and that we have yet perfected the application of these spiritual truths that we're going to look at this evening. If at any time in our study this evening I sound clinical, or I'm delving into details that seem to be unaware or ignorant to the pain that you are going through, forgive me - it's not my intention. But it is my intention this evening to get to the bottom, discerning what the mind of God is with regards to these spiritual truths.

Paul begins by speaking again to the unmarried, and this time he brings along with the unmarried into his conversation those who could be classed as widows. Our last study, verses 1 to 7, touched on those who are unmarried and have been such, and whether it would be right for them to get married or just to stay single. I would encourage you to get that tape to really understand the context of all the circumstances contemporary to the people in Corinth that Paul was speaking to. Tonight in verses 8 and 9 he talks about those who are unmarried and those who are widows. Now what I want you to notice before we even look at the subject of unmarried people and widows is how he begins this sentence in verse 8, because it's repeated right throughout this passage, and it will help our understanding and interpretation of it.

He says: 'I say therefore'. Now in the Greek language it's the same expression that's used in verse 10, where he says: 'And unto the married'. It's the same expression as verse 12 too: 'But to the rest speak I'. It really is a connective part of language, which in Greek is 'de', and in our English it would be better translated: 'now'. It's a verb that's used when a man is speaking or commanding something, so you could change verse 8, verse 10, and verse 12, the beginning of them to say: 'And now'. Verse 8: 'And now to the unmarried'. Verse 10: 'And now to the married'. Verse 12: 'And now to the rest'. So we see right away, by the connective verb of speaking, he is differentiating between classifications of types of people in relation to marriage bond that he's speaking to. Now that's very important as we go through this passage, that Paul is commanding things to different situations of people related to the marriage bond one way or the other - whether they're single, whether they're married, whether they're divorced, or whatever.

This phrase suggests that Paul is taking up these situations, and he's applying one specific rule to them all. That's also very important, because as you see in verse 8 he says: 'now I say to the unmarried'; verse 10 'now I say to the married'; verse 12 'now I say to the rest' - he's saying the one thing to all of them. Now you might think that that is to over-simplify the matter, but I think if you analyse it yourself you will see that he says to all of them: 'I want you to stay as you are...I want you to stay as you are'. Now we'll see this as we go through, but one proof of that is verse 17 where he concludes the whole matter, and he says: 'But as God hath distributed to every man, as the Lord hath called every one, so let him walk. And so ordain I in all churches'. Verse 20 as well, and we'll see this next week as we enter into this realm: 'Let every man abide in the same calling wherein he was called'. So you understand that the main point and the main theme of everything that Paul is saying through these verses this evening is: 'Stay in the same place as you were when you were converted'. I think if we understand that it will help in our interpretation.

So we see this in verse 8, because he's reiterating what he's already said with regards to the single life. He extends it this time to widows, and he said: 'I wish that you were just like I am'. If you find yourself single, and you've got the gift of singleness - as we saw last week, and it is a gift - stay as you are. Don't be seeking to be married. He expands this to widows and he says: 'If you find yourself a widow', some would say this word 'unmarried' could actually mean widowers, 'if you find yourself in that predicament, stay as you are'. Of course, in these days in the early Church there was great pressure on folk who are unmarried to be married, but especially upon widows - more so than widowers, because women tended to depend more in those days on their husband to get by financially and in all sorts of ways with regards to support. There could be a temptation of them feeling insecure, and feeling lacking without being married - but Paul says: 'Hold your emotions for a minute, because as far as I can see it's better to stay the way you are'.

In fact, he uses the word that he used in verse 1 and he says: 'It's good, it's good for you to stay this way. It's good for them if they abide even as I am'. He uses the same statement to prove - as I've said, he's saying he wants you to stay as you are, verse 26: 'I suppose therefore that this is good for the present distress, I say, that it is good for a man so to be' - it is good to stay single. What was the present distress? Well, people were being murdered for their faith, being martyred. He's saying to single people: 'What's the point of getting married, only to see your wife and your children slaughtered, and persecuted, and martyred?'. He's saying to widows: 'Don't get married again at the present distress, because the chances are you'll be widowed again, and you don't want that do you?'

If you look at verse 37, again: 'Nevertheless he that standeth stedfast in his heart, having no necessity, but hath power over his own will, and hath so decreed in his heart that he will keep his virgin', not get married, 'doeth well', or doeth good. The word right throughout those three verses is 'kalos' (sp?), the word 'good', and it means 'morally upstanding'. There is nothing wrong with staying single, or if you're a widow there's nothing wrong with staying a widow - in fact, the Bible commends it: 'It is good'. Now Paul says in verse 8: 'If they abide', and that insinuates that it is their choice, he's not telling them to do it, but it's their choice: if you abide as he is, well, that's commendable; but it's not the rule, it's not a command. This is shown in the fact that he says: 'It is good for them if they abide even as I' - 'I had a choice whether to get married or not, but I took the choice, not a command, but I can do it: stay single. It's good if they want to do it and they do do it'. It's not a right or wrong issue, we saw that last week. The emphasis is on Paul's conscious decision.

Of course, if you think about it for a moment, and if you read any of the Acts of the Apostles you would see very clearly that it would have been difficult, I'll not say impossible, but difficult for Paul to live the kind of missionary life that he did if he had been bringing a wife along with him everywhere. This is what Paul is trying to say: if you've got the gift of being single, it's necessary that you stay single. As we'll see in a couple of weeks time there are certain things that single people can do for the Lord that people who are married cannot do because of all the burdens of marital life and family life with children. John Berridge (sp?) was a countryside preacher, and historians say that if he had lived in the city of London, or perhaps Edinburgh, he would have been one of the most famous preachers that ever lived. But because he preached around the little villages of England he became known as 'the countryside Whitefield'. He was quaint and eccentric, he probably would have admitted that himself, but all that did was add to his appeal as a preacher. The people came in their droves to come and hear him preaching in the fields. In fact we're told that in one year he led more than 4000 souls to the Lord Jesus Christ. He evangelised non-stop for 40 years of his life before he passed on to glory. John Berridge insisted that his ministry would be most effective if he remained unmarried, to such an extent that he became worried that the Wesley brothers and George Whitefield hadn't done likewise, and they had went and got married. Whitefield had married a woman with whom he had spent less than a week, and she died in 1768. Poor John Wesley had marital woes, his wife left him.

Writing to Lady Huntingdon, who some of you may know was the patron of those English evangelists in those days, Berridge observed these words, and I quote you, and listen to this carefully - here's some advice: 'No trap is so mischievous to the field preacher as wedlock, and it is laid for him at every hedge corner. Matrimony has quite maimed poor Charles Wesley, and might have spoiled John Wesley and George Whitefield if a wise Master had not graciously sent them a brace pair of ferrets' - what about that! 'Dear George has his liberty again, and he will escape well if he is not caught by another tenterhook. Eight or nine years ago, having been grievously tormented with housekeeping, I thought of looking out for wife myself, but it seemed highly needful to ask advice of the Lord. So, kneeling down before the table, with a Bible between my hands, I besought the Lord to give me direction'. And the Lord gave John Berridge Jeremiah 16 and 2: 'Thou shall not take thee a wife, neither shalt thou have sons or daughters in this place'. He relinquished all his thoughts of marriage and gave himself to pleasing the Lord, as Paul says, without distraction.

Perhaps dear John Berridge is erring on the side of those who said: 'It's good for a man not to touch a woman', and condemning those that are married. But he's right as far as he was concerned, that was the gift that God had given to him, and it made his ministry more effective. However, Paul says there is an exception to this gift of singleness and it's found in verse 9: 'If they cannot contain, let them marry: for it is better to marry than to burn'. There is a good reason why you should not stay single, and it's simply this: if you cannot stay single. That's the point! If you cannot contain, if you've a lack of power over your self-control, Paul says: 'Let them marry, for it's better to marry than to burn'. 'To burn' simply means to be inflamed with passion, a type of turbulent emotional struggle within you towards sin. If you struggle with this, and if you yield to it, it will distract you and devastate your whole spiritual inner life and outer life.

The only way to have an antidote against this is to get married. Let me say this: I don't think that Paul is just saying 'Get married if you're burning with lust', but I believe Paul is saying not just 'if you cannot control yourself', but 'if you are not exercising self-control'. That's the point: not just if there's a struggle going on within you, but the implication is that the people he's talking to here were doing what married people ought to be doing, but they themselves were not married. They were committing fornication, what he's already talked about at the end of chapter 6, and they were probably going to these ritual pagan prostitutes and exercising this idolatrous worship that was in the form of sexual rites and rituals. Paul is saying: 'Rather than do these things, it is better to marry and exercise your sexual passions and appetites in God's ordained way'.

Now often this verse is applied, and I don't think it's wrong in one sense to apply it to those sexual desires that inflame those who are young among us, but the specific application is to those who are already committing the sins of lust, that's who the application is too. Those who are not controlling, not 'cannot', but those who cannot contain and are not containing their sexual appetites. Paul says: 'If you're single, if you are widowed, stay as you are - with one exception: those who are not exercising continence'. I hope you can see that as regards to the unmarried and the widows.

Then he moves on to this next statement: 'And now to the married I command'. He's really touching on the subject of divorce, look at verses 10 and 11: 'I command, yet not I, but the Lord, Let not the wife depart from her husband: But and if she depart, let her remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband: and let not the husband put away his wife'. Now I said this last week, but I have to reiterate it, that 1 Corinthians 7 is not an A-to-Z of marriage, it's not a textbook that gives answers to every eventuality and every question with regards to marriage, and it certainly is not a textbook on the subject of divorce. What 1 Corinthians 7 is doing is answering the specific questions that the Corinthians had, and therefore we must assume that if they had questions on marriage, and now Paul is addressing the subject of divorce, they must have asked a question that touches on the issue of whether Christians ought to be divorced or not.

Now I believe that the statements of Paul in verses 10 and 11, the brevity of it and the clarity of it are astounding, and also the things that Paul leaves out in these verses strike us and ought to make us sit up in our interpretation of it. One author said that this definition of Christians and divorce is simple, authoritative, uncompromising and uncomplicated. Let's not complicate things this evening, let's read the Scriptures as plain as they are within the word of God. The two questions that were in the Corinthians minds, I believe, considering the answer that Paul gave them, was first of all: 'What is the position when a wife separates from her husband, when a wife decides to separate from her husband?'. Verse 10, look at it: 'Let not the wife depart from her husband'. The second question is: 'Should a husband ever divorce his wife?'. Verse 11: 'But and if she depart, let her remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband: and let not the husband', there it is, 'put away his wife'.

Now in order to understand what these questions are asking, and what the answers Paul is giving to them are, you've got to understand that there are different Greek words used in this portion of Scripture. I want to take this slowly so we don't misunderstand everything. If you look at verse 10, look at the word 'depart': 'Let not

the wife depart from her husband'. That word 'depart' in the Greek is the word for 'separate'. It is clearly the word for 'separate', yet there is a different word that is used in verse 11 where it says at the end: 'Let not the husband put away his wife'. Now in the English or Authorised Version they are distinct with different translations because they are different words. Verse 11 'put away' is literally the word 'divorce'. Now there is an error that many commentators and Bible teachers make, and that is to say that both these words mean 'to divorce' - they do not! If they meant 'to divorce', Paul would have used the same word in both instances, he would not have confused us in our understanding of these things.

The first means 'separate', the second means 'to divorce', that is quite clear. But when Paul answers their two questions, Paul answers it in a command, look at verse 10: 'To the married I command'. Now if you were with us last week, Paul was giving some advice, but at no point yet has Paul commanded believers to do anything. He is now doing something that he hasn't done before, this issue is so important that he says: 'I'm commanding you, and I can command you with authority because it's not really me that is commanding you, it's the Lord'. Do you see that? 'I command, yet not I, but the Lord'. Now why is he saying this? Because Paul is simply reiterating in verses 10 and 11 the teaching of the Lord Jesus. It's the Lord's command, he's echoing what the Lord has already said, and primarily he's reciting the portion of Scripture found in Mark's gospel chapter 10 verses 2 to 12. Now we don't have time to look at that, but if you want to look at it at home please feel free to do so, for it's so important.

So Paul says, in the light of what the Lord taught in Mark chapter 10, here's his answer: one, a wife must not separate from her husband - however, he goes on, there may be circumstances that will come into the marriage that leave it impossible for that woman to continue to live with that man, and she should try to remain married, but if she cannot she is permitted to separate but she is to remain unmarried in the position of separation. I think that's clear enough for you to see: 'Let not the wife depart from her husband: But and if she depart', or separate, 'let her remain unmarried' - she should remain unmarried. The reason being, in Mark chapter 10, the whole point of what the Lord Jesus was saying in answer to the Pharisees was: if you are divorced and remarried you are in danger of committing adultery, and that's what the Lord Jesus taught and that is simply what Paul is reiterating. If a woman is to separate herself from her husband, she is to remain unmarried. You will notice that in Mark 10 the Lord Jesus doesn't mention a second marriage, and Paul the apostle here, as he addresses divorce, doesn't mention second marriage at all - he doesn't mention second marriage as an option for a woman that separates with her husband.

I hope you're picking all this up as we go along. He's saying that the ideal is not to depart, don't depart; but he makes a concession. Do you see what he's saying here? Stay as you are! Stay as you are! The only concession is that if things get so bad - and I don't think God wants any woman to stay in a situation where she is abused physically, mentally, verbally, maybe even spiritually - if things get that bad and she has done all that she can, she is permitted to separate. Notice the different word, she is permitted to separate - but she must not marry! Is that not clear? 'Let not the wife depart from her husband: But and if she depart, let her remain unmarried', the only other alternative is, 'or be reconciled to her husband'.

You see, I think that sometimes we get confused about these issues simply because Jesus and Paul were not as concerned about divorce as we are. They were more concerned with the permanency of marriage. In the Gospels and the epistles where Jesus and Paul address the issue of marriage and divorce, they are concerned chiefly to pronounce that if anyone after divorce remarries it is the equivalent of adultery. You can go through the passages where the Lord and Paul speak on divorce, and I think that you will see that very clearly. They are opposed to divorce, but the strength of their statements is to prohibit remarriage.

Now the big question that we need to ask in the light of the context of what we're reading here is: this permission and this concession Paul gives for a woman to separate from a husband, do you think it was because of the reasons that we give today? Now there are legitimate reasons, as I mentioned: abuse, physical

or whatever - you can't expect a woman to live in that situation, or even, for that matter, a man. But do you think those were the cases that Paul was instituting in Corinth? I don't think they were at all, as a matter of fact the likelihood is that they were probably immoral cases where there was so much lust and sexual immorality and fornication that Paul has been dealing with already, and ritual prostitution, that the likelihood was that a woman could actually want to be separated from her husband in the sense of a sexual separation to perform ritual prostitution - and we know that these Corinthians believers faced this temptation. The other alternative explanation could also be that there were those who were saying: 'Well, I'm a Christian and surely it's better not to get involved with sexual matters because in my unconverted past they were source of real sin and condemnation to me. Therefore, would it not be better for me to just cut these off totally and to divorce my husband even though he's a Christian?'

Paul says to both those situations: 'Even if your wife or your husband is tempted to go into this sexual ritual of worship in the pagan world, you're to stay with them as long as you can', and even in the other alternative, if you're wanting to cut off all relationships with your husband or wife because you feel that it's marked of your past, you're not to depart, not to separate from your spouse. Do you not think that if Paul was believing that there were grounds, as many say there are grounds to divorce on the ground of adultery and fornication, do you not think Paul would have brought this exception clause in here in the Corinthian situation? Do you not think he would say: 'Yes, it's OK if they've committed fornication, or if they've committed adultery'? But the point that Paul is wanting to bring across to these believers is the permanency of marriage. The question that we ask is the wrong question, it shouldn't be: 'When am I allowed to get divorced? Can I get remarried?', the question ought to be, long ago, 'Am I marrying the right person?' - because this thing is permanent!

Young people, I address you, and I'm not trying to condemn those who have been divorced or remarried, I'm chiefly trying to instruct our young people - as you will hear in marriage vows and ceremonies over and over again - this is not to be entered lightly or unadvisedly because of its permanency! Paul says to a woman who perhaps has a temptation to leave her husband: 'Stay as you are, with one concession, if things get so difficult you have to leave, and if you leave you're to remain unmarried' - that's black and white, I hope you can see that.

But he answers the second question saying that a husband must not divorce the wife: 'Let him not put her away'. It's a different word, the word for 'divorce', and really the first lesson that we get here is that there is a responsibility that's mutual in marriage. It's not just the responsibility of the wife to stay maybe in a difficult situation, and I'm not saying how difficult that situation can get - and we all know that in marriage we all will have difficult situations at some time or another, and if we're honest we may even admit that there's times we would like to get out. That's not speaking personally, by the way, just in case you quote me!

What Paul is making clear is: separation is undesirable, but it is permitted. But in verse 11 divorce is prohibited. Can you see the difference here? These two words that are used, they are different. The word for 'separation', there's a concession; but with regards to divorce it's just a clean break of prohibition: 'Let not the husband put away his wife'. It is concurrent with Mark chapter 10, Luke chapter 16, that tell us that marriage is permanent and that divorce is not for the child of God. There is significance in the fact that Paul doesn't quote from Matthew chapter 5, where there is the exception clause: 'except for the case of fornication'. Why does he not quote from Matthew 5, or Matthew 19 where it's repeated? Well it's significant that he doesn't do this, and it's so significant in the light that in chapter 5 of Corinthians he was dealing with a case of fornication, and in chapter 6 he's dealing with the theories and teachings with regard to fornication - you'd think it would be common sense when he enters into the realm of divorce, that he would bring the exception clause in 'except for fornication' - but he doesn't!

Why doesn't he? He doesn't because it is irrelevant to this particular situation. It's irrelevant to the discussion because Matthew's exception clause, as Matthew's gospel is primarily to the Jews so is that statement, and it

speaks of a time, I believe, in the betrothal period which is a bit like our engagement period, where there was a covenant entered into which was almost akin to 100% marriage but it wasn't quite there, the consummation of the marriage still had to happen. But if the wife was found to be unfaithful in that betrothal period, the husband had grounds to terminate the covenant and officially have a divorce, and it was purely Jewish. That's why Matthew writes it to the Jewish mind, but when Paul comes now to speak to Corinthians where fornication is rife inside and outside of marriage, he leaves the exception clause out - why? Because it's Jewish! Because, for the Gentile believer, there is no exception to marriage, but marriage is permanent. When you consider that many of these pagans, even those who were converted, were going to pagan ritual prostitutes and committing fornication probably, Paul would have had every right if there was an exception to come in and say: 'These fornicators, you've got grounds to divorce them' - but he didn't do it! The Lord's command, and Paul is only reiterating what the Lord says, is that marriage is permanent, and God hates divorce - as Malachi 2:16 says.

He addresses the unmarried and the widows, he addresses the subject of divorce, and then he comes in and speaks into mixed marriages in verses 12 to 16. In verses 12 to 14 there's a Christian converted, this is the scenario, after he is married to an unbeliever he gets saved, and his partner is willing to continue with him. So this man gets saved after he is married to an unbeliever, and the unbeliever wants to stay with him. In verses 15 to 16 you have a different scenario: a Christian who gets saved, but their partner is not willing to continue the marriage. Now Paul address this and says: 'Now speak I, not the Lord' - now that doesn't mean that what Paul is going to say isn't worth the paper it's written on. It doesn't mean it doesn't have any authority, but what he's saying is that the Lord in Mark chapter 10 didn't deal with this type of problem, so I'm not quoting any passage - which proves that he was quoting Mark chapter 10 before - he says: 'I'm not quoting a command of the Lord, but I'm giving you advice', and as we look at verse 40 we see that that advice is from the Lord, because all Scripture is God breathed: 'But she is happier if she so abide, after my judgment: and I think also that I have the Spirit of God'. He's showing that what he says comes from God, but it's something that the Lord Himself didn't cover in His teaching upon the earth.

But it is the same advice...he's giving the same advice to the first couple and the second couple. The man who gets saved after he's married and his wife wants to stay with him, what does Paul say? 'Stay as you are', but there is one concession: that couple - the guy gets converted after marriage, and Paul says 'Stay as you are', but the other person that's not saved doesn't want to stay in a marriage, but Paul says that's the only concession, the only concession. Let's look at it in a bit more detail so that we don't misunderstand what Paul is saying. He says: 'But to the rest', verse 12, that means all the circumstances that he hasn't already covered in unmarried and widows, and those are thinking of divorcing their husbands. Here is a situation that's different. Now you've got to note couple of things, and I know we're being very detailed tonight, but this is important. You've got to notice that the situations in these verses are dependent upon the attitude of the unbelieving partner. It is not the Christian who's deciding whether to stay or not with a non-Christian, it's the non-Christian who's deciding whether to stay or whether to go. There is no insinuation that it is expected that a Christian should think of divorce!

I hope you can see that. The possibility of divorce lies only with the unbeliever in these verses. In verse 14 Paul gives the reason why they should stay as they are: 'For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband: else were your children unclean; but now are they holy'. Here's the reason why the Christian should remain married: because their husband or wife, who is an unbeliever, is made holy, is sanctified. The likelihood is that some of these over-zealous Christians in Corinth were saying: 'I've got to get divorced now, because I'm a Christian and my husband's not, so we've got to sever this bond. It's an unequal yoke'. Remember that they were married before they were converted, and then there's the other ones who are saying: 'Well, perhaps my wife or my husband is still engaged in this pagan ritualistic immoral fornicatory worship, I have to divorce them!'.

What does Paul say? 'Stay as you are' - why? What's the grounds? Here's the grounds: literally in the Greek 'sanctified is the unbelieving husband', and 'sanctified is the unbelieving wife'. They are sanctified! Even if your husband or wife is an unbeliever and you're saved, they are sanctified in you - now that doesn't mean they're saved, it doesn't even mean spiritual progressive sanctification that you have in the Christian life, but it's taking the naked word 'sanctified' in its literal meaning 'to set apart' - they are set apart in you! Because of that it makes them different, they are set apart socially. If I could illustrate it like this, say Thorndyke Street - I don't know who lives there, whether there's any believers live in Thorndyke Street - but take for instance that Thorndyke Street was more pagan than it already is, and there wasn't a believer in it. Then all of a sudden Sammy gets saved, gloriously saved, and he is the only one in his house that's saved - Paul is saying that his wife, even though she's a pagan, and still worshipping her pagan gods, is set apart. She's different now because her husband is saved, and he goes on to say even their children are different, they're set apart. He says that their children are holy.

Now what this simply is is holiness by association, you find it in Exodus 29:37 where the altar of God is described as most holy, and then Moses adds 'whatsoever toucheth the altar shall be holy' - whatsoever associates with the altar shall be holy. Now here's the train of thought that Paul is bringing to us tonight: if your wife is set apart, even though she's a pagan, even though she's maybe worshipping her pagan gods in awful rituals, there's no need to put her away or to separate from her because she is sanctified in the Lord. Now this is important, because many godly men and scholars who try to tell us that it's legitimate to be divorced as a Christian and then remarried, use Old Testament passages to prove this to us. They say that there are times in the Old Testament where God commanded His people to divorce, and that is true. God commanded His people in Ezra chapter 9 verses 1 and 2 to divorce the wives that they took from the false tribes they were forbidden to marry from. You find it in chapter 10 as well, they were told to divorce them; in the book of the Nehemiah you find exactly the same thing in chapter 13 - and they say: 'There it is, that there are some times that God allowed divorce'. But you can't use that as an example! Because these people were in an unequal yoke, but we are now in the New Testament and Paul is saying by revelation that in the New Testament, even when there's a husband saved and a wife not, that the wife is sanctified by the husband and they are made holy by association and there's no need to separate, there's no need to divorce!

The situation has changed, and if I could be pastoral just for a moment, does that not encourage your heart, dear soul? If you're married to an unbeliever, that if you were under law you would be cursed, but under grace you're blessed and your husband's blessed too and your wife, and your wee children also, because of Christ. Isn't that marvellous? My friend, we have to get to the bottom of this because there is a lot of confusion about it. In verse 15 Paul really ties the whole matter up, he says: 'But if the unbelieving depart, let him depart' - if the unbelieving separate, is the word, let him separate. So here you have the believer, but the unbelieving partner wants to terminate and finish the marriage and leave. They are determined on separation, and if that's the case, Paul says: 'You've got to put up with it, there's nothing you can do about it'.

Now I think what's being talked about here concerning the word is 'separation', but we live in a situation today where you're divorced and you can do nothing about it. We have to address and apply these Scriptures to these situations, but what is amazing to me as I've been studying today is the amount of expositors that assume that this expression 'not under bondage' is legitimate proof to say that you're allowed after a divorce to get remarried, if you've been deserted by another party that you're free to marry. The opening statement in verse 15, now I'm going to clear this up hopefully tonight - I'm sure not for everybody, but I'm going to try my best - verse 15: 'But if the unbelieving depart, let him depart'. Now there again is the inference, what is it Paul has been saying right along? 'Stay as you are'. Hasn't that been the point all along? Stay as you are - if they depart, let them, and stay as you are.

But he goes on: 'A brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases: but God hath called us to peace'. He's not enslaved, and so, scholars say, this means that he is no longer under the marriage bond and he's free

to get married again. Now you see this word 'enslaved', it is derived from the word 'doulos' in Greek, and if you go right throughout your whole New Testament every time Paul uses it it's used in a figurative sense. The ordinary word that Paul uses for a marriage bond is not the word derived from 'doulos', but it is a word 'deo', that's the word he uses when he's talking about a legal ritualistic dutiful bond of marriage - but that is not the word he's using here. Let me prove this to you, because later on in this chapter he uses the word for the bondage of marriage, verse 39: 'The wife is bound by the law as long as her husband liveth; but if he be dead, she is at liberty to be married to whom she will; only in the Lord'. So there is the marriage bondage, if you like, legally and spiritually in the eyes of God; and the only way that can be dissolved is at death.

But that's not the word Paul is using for 'enslaved' here, let me prove to you again - Romans chapter 7 and verse 2: 'For the woman which hath an husband is bound by the law', 'deo' again, the word for the legal, spiritual covenant of marriage. But this is not the same word that Paul is using in 1 Corinthians 7. In fact, this is the only time that Paul ever uses the word in relation to marriage here. Here it is, but it doesn't mean that once you're divorced you're free to marry again - the point is that you're not bound to maintain a marriage when a partner has deserted you, you not to try and make them stay with you, and try and convert them for the rest of your life. You can't restrain your spouse from departing from you, and in that case you're not bound to be enslaved to some kind of mechanical retention at all costs of a relationship that is totally abandoned.

Anyway, the word that is used for separation is not 'divorce', the word in verse 13 is 'to divorce', the word in verse 15 is 'separate' with regards to both husband and wife. Divorce is not in view. But here's the question: even if divorce was meant in that verse, to read into this phrase 'under bondage' that you're allowed to remarry is not only fanciful exegesis, but I would say to you it's irresponsible practice, because you're building on one little word that is disputed the whole marriage institution of divorced people getting remarried again. In my humble estimation that is a tragedy, if all you've got is a misinterpretation of one word in 1 Corinthians 7, and I believe that's all they have.

Add to that the fact that church leaders of the first five centuries, 500 years, with the exception of one, taught that 1 Corinthians 7 verse 15 does not permit remarriage to believers who are deserted. If you weren't convinced, the end of verse 15 says: 'God has called us to peace'. It's referring to all these matters of mixed marriage, that peace is to be the common denominator. Whether the partner that's living with you is willing to stay with you, you're to live with them in peace and let them remain, you're not to push them out - that's the point. But equally so, if the other partner refuses to stay with you you're not to try and coerce them against peace to stay when they're determined to leave, but you're to live in peace whatever the case is and only separate if necessary.

The chief reason to do this is found in verse 16: 'For what knowest thou, O wife, whether thou shalt save thy husband? or how knowest thou, O man, whether thou shalt save thy wife?'. Is that not encouraging to you who are married to an unbeliever? To know that, I'm not saying you should put up with things that are criminal and illegal and absolutely unforgivable, don't misunderstand me and don't twist my words - but I am saying that you know and I know that people who live with unconverted folk have to put up with an awful lot at times. But isn't good to know that what you put up with could lead to the salvation of your husband or wife?

Now give me a couple of minutes as I conclude tonight. This passage has been misused and abused to mistreat people who are divorced, people who are remarried, and treat them like lepers. I want to challenge this assembly that we are not to shun people like this or look down on them, and we have a challenge today more than ever in the climate that we live in to deal with these problems and apply these Scriptures to our contemporary situation. We must honour the biblical principles and apply them to our changing world today, and I want to say this clearly: divorce and remarriage is not the unpardonable sin! It's not! Whether before

conversion or after conversion! What I don't want to come across as saying is that in some way everything else is almost forgivable, but this is not forgivable - that's not what I'm saying. What I am saying is that we must resist the current itch in evangelicalism to find proof texts where they cannot be found to legitimise divorce and remarriage among children of God, and it is rife today more than it has ever been. We must do what Paul was doing, what our Lord was doing: holding forth the ideal of marriage for our young people, who are now being conditioned to think that in certain circumstances I can get out of it and I can start all over again! We do them a great disservice. What the world needs to see is what these texts are teaching us: that when we are converted, that in whatever state we find ourselves - single, widowed, married, divorced - we are to stay as we are when we received the calling of God, and glorify God in it, even if our partner is unsaved and God alone knows perhaps one day they may be saved.

A lady had an unbelieving husband, she tried her best in every way and she sought advice of her Pastor. She said: 'I've done all to persuade him but to know effect'. He said: 'Madam, talk more to God about your husband and less to your husband about God'. It's not either or you know, both are necessary - but what will speak to your unbelieving husband, and what will speak loudest to an unbelieving world, is Christian marriages that hold together and don't look for divorce.

Father, we come before Thee tonight, and Lord we pray for each head bowed here - those in marriages and those outside marriages. We pray for those who have been divorced, and Lord we do want them to know that we love them, and we don't in anyway look down upon them - for many of them it was not their fault. Our Father, we live in an awful day where people are being hurt round about by immorality on every side. Lord, we want to love those folk and care for those folk, and even folk who are remarried - Lord, we don't condemn anybody, but we are seeking to walk in Thy word and according to Thy will. We pray especially for these young people here tonight, that those who are married and those who are considering marriage will not enter it lightly or unadvisedly, but with due consideration they will realise the permanence of it in the eyes of Almighty God. Lord, help us in our marriages - we pray for the single folk here and the widows who are trying to walk a path of purity that is very difficult at times. We just pray that all of us will put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, for Jesus' sake we ask it. Amen.

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Marriage And Singleness - Chapter 3

"Stay As You Are"

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I Corinthians 7:17-24

1. ***The Guiding Principle (verse 17)***
2. ***Applied To Jewish Rites (verses 18-19)***
3. ***Applied To Social Status (verses 20-24)***

When we embarked upon this chapter 7, we embarked, as it were, upon a sub-series found within this book. There are many different issues addressed by the great apostle in 1 Corinthians, that's why it's so interesting - at least I think it's interesting, I don't know about you - these Monday nights, I hope you do. There is so much covered in one particular book, but in chapter 7 we have been slowing down, as it were, in order to really get everything that Paul is saying concerning marriage, relationships, celibacy, single life, those who are divorced, whether it is legitimate to be remarried, and also those who are widowed, and those we will be looking at later on who are virgins, and what they ought to do with regards to the things of God concerning the situations in which they find themselves in these personal relationships. So we'll be looking these weeks at marriage matters, and we'll be doing that, I think, for a week or two yet - but tonight I want to home in on the real principle that is behind all that Paul says, because we found out in the last study two weeks ago when we looked quite considerably at the subject of divorce, that the principle that was coming out from everything that Paul said and the varying situations that Paul addressed, the one principal was: stay as you are. It is better to stay as you are than alter your circumstances.

So we're going to look at a few verses tonight that really, if you like, unpack that principle behind all that Paul says in this chapter. We begin reading at verse 17 through to 24: "But as God hath distributed to every man, as the Lord hath called every one, so let him walk. And so ordain I in all churches. Is any man called being circumcised? Let him not become uncircumcised. Is any called in uncircumcision? Let him not be circumcised. Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but the keeping of the commandments of God. Let every man abide in the same calling wherein he was called. Art thou called being a servant? Care not for it: but if thou mayest be made free, use it rather. For he that is called in the Lord, being a servant, is the Lord's freeman: likewise also he that is called, being free, is Christ's servant. Ye are bought with a price; be not ye the servants of men. Brethren, let every man, wherein he is called, therein abide with God".

'The grass is greener on the other side' is a condition that many of us fall foul of in our lifetime at sometime or another. I don't know whether there's anybody here this evening suffering from this. When we think of it in the context of relationships and marriage and so on, and even some of the things that Paul touches in these verses that we've just read, perhaps there are some gathered with us this evening saying: 'Well, I wish I wasn't married, I wish I'd never got married'. That would be a terrible thing to say, wouldn't it? But you know, there may be times that even in the context of what Paul says, that it's easier at times to serve the Lord, and some of you may be tempted to say: 'Well, if I didn't have the ties, the restrictions of a family home, a wife, children, a husband, well, I could be on the mission field or something, or I could be an evangelist roaming from house-to-house and hedge-to-hedge with the Gospel'. Some could say the opposite: 'Well, I feel I'm left on the shelf, and I wish I were married - oh, if there was anything I would want, I would long to be married'.

Paul talks about slaves and masters in this passage, and perhaps some people are saying: 'Well, I wish I was unemployed, I wish I hadn't work to go to in the morning'. Or maybe you're unemployed, and you think: 'Well, I wish I was employed, I really want to be employed', and you're obsessed by this. Maybe you're obsessed by the job that you have, getting promotion within it; or maybe you would long for a better job, or a job that you have true satisfaction in - and maybe the whole motivation for that is because you just would like a bit more money to buy some of the possessions you want, to have a more luxurious and affluent lifestyle.

Now we have to be careful to say that some of those things are wrong, not all of those things are wrong - but what is wrong, according to the New Testament, is to be preoccupied with those things, to let those things take over your life so much so that all that you think about is those things, and you begin to change your external circumstances to achieve your one purpose and prime goal in life, no matter what that is. But what is definitely wrong is if you go further, just like the Corinthians did, and if you make the conclusion and the equation: 'Well, if I only wasn't married, then I would be more spiritual', or 'If I was married', or 'If I was married to a better Christian they would encourage me in the faith and I would be more spiritual', or 'If I wasn't married to a non-Christian the way I am, perhaps I would be able to be more spiritual and have a more spiritual home. If my husband was saved, perhaps if I went to a better church, if I had more of an education, if I had more money, if I had more things going for me I might be more spiritual for the Lord Jesus Christ and for the furtherance of His Gospel'.

That was akin to what the Corinthians were saying, and they made a fatal mistake - not only to say those things, but they went a little bit further to drastically change their external circumstances in order to bring these things into being which they thought would make them more spiritual. This was the Corinthian problem. Equally today, some try and change society around us. They make the equation in their minds: 'Well, if only I could infiltrate society, even as a Christian, and change society - relieve poverty, help the sick, go to the land where there there's famine and bring aid to them - well then I would contribute a little bit more and it would make me more spiritual, and it would make the world a better place'. Now both of these scenarios are fatal for the spiritual life and for your growth in maturity, because both of them miss the fundamental point of why the Lord Jesus Christ came into the world. The Lord Jesus did not come to earth to instigate external societal revolution in this world, but the Lord Jesus came into the world in order to instigate spiritual revelation in the hearts and in the lives of individuals.

Now don't misunderstand me this evening: although we seek as much as we can to influence always for the good and for the right wherever we are found in life from day-to-day, I hope none of us are foolish enough to think that we in some way can turn the world upside-down to such an extent that we change fundamentally and philosophically this world system. You cannot do it! Even when the Lord Jesus Christ was face-to-face with Pilate in John chapter 18, He confessed to Pilate that that was not His goal in coming to earth. He said: 'My kingdom is not of this world'. Although there is coming a day when His kingdom will come upon the earth in fulfilment of prophetic Scriptures, the Lord Jesus in His first advent had come to set up a kingdom in men's hearts, not to change or instigate some external changes and revolutions in society and in the institutions and governments of our world - but rather to penetrate the hearts, the personal lives of individuals, and change that way.

I believe personally that Christianity cannot help but radically affect society in which Christians are living, and that ought to always be the case - institutions ought to be affected when Christians are living within a generation. But what we cannot fail to miss is that the primary purpose of the Gospel is internal, a change from within that affects without. Now what I want you to see this evening is that the Corinthians were trying to change their external circumstances to affect themselves internally. They thought that by changing their externalities they could become more spiritual. So what was happening was, the married were saying: 'Well, if I could just get a justification for getting a divorce and not been married, well then I'd be freed from all the

sexual temptations that I have believed from my past life is so terribly sinful, and I could be freed to be holy and righteous for the Lord'. Those who were slaves were saying: 'Well, I don't believe it's right that I should be a slave. I'm told that I'm now free in the liberty with which Christ has made me free, and to be no longer entangled with the yoke of bondage - so how can slavery be right?'. Slaves were beginning to seek emancipation, and seeking what they saw as their human rights.

What we've got to see tonight from the teaching of Paul is that Christianity has not been brought to this world by the Lord Jesus Christ to destroy governments, to destroy societies, or to break up families. Don't misunderstand me, the Lord Jesus said that He had come to bring a sword, the Lord Jesus said that He had come to put at variance a husband and wife, and a son and a daughter; but that is the default if you like, that is the fallout and the overflow, the effect of what the Gospel does - but that is not the primary purpose of the Gospel, the primary purpose of the Gospel is to change individuals, not to change countries or to change governments or to change whole families all at once, but to work on the individual. The main point of what Paul is bringing to us through this passage is: Christians can be Christians anywhere in any situation - and although Christianity ought to bring, when Christians are living in a society, better government, better society, better families; the main point of what Paul is saying being Christian really means is that you can be a Christian anywhere in any situation, even if the government, the institutions and your family is not changed.

You see you can be a Christian in a dictatorship, and you can also be a Christian, as you know, in a democracy - but you can even be a Christian in anarchy, when everything is against you, against government, against civilisation. You can be a Christian if you're a man, you can be a Christian if you're woman, you can be a Christian if you're a child, if you're an adult, if you're married, if you're single, if you're divorced, if you're a Jew, if you're a Gentile, if you're a slave, if you're free you can be a Christian! Even though those external circumstances are not altered you still can be a child of God. If you live in Iraq you can be a Christian as well as you can live in the United Kingdom and be a Christian, in Vietnam or in China, in Germany or in Dublin. Paul is saying: whatever you are, wherever you are, you can live, exist as a Christian.

Now please do not misunderstand what Paul is saying, and what I'm expounding this evening: he's not in any shape or form justifying corrupt governments or immoral societies - in fact one day God's going to come and judge societies and corrupt governments. He is saying that the Gospel is not to revolutionise social institutions, rather to revolutionise men's hearts and affect society, if necessary, through that. Christianity doesn't mean that you cease to be a husband, or you cease to be a slave; but Christianity means you become better husband, you become a better wife, you become a better slave or son or daughter or citizen or student, or whatever you are. In other words, this Gospel is so radical and so powerful that it can be planted and take root anywhere across the face of the globe, no matter what is going against it! Isn't that tremendous? That where sin abounds, grace doth much more abound - and no matter how deep-dyed your sinful background is, praise God: anyone, and I say that, anyone can be a Christian! You don't have to engineer external circumstances before you come to Christ - it's just as well, because I don't think any of us here tonight would have been taken in by Him if that was the case.

So Paul begins here in this paragraph, and you would almost think he was digressing from off the main track of talking about marriage - and that is true of the content. He has digressed to talk about those circumcised Jews, uncircumcised Gentiles and slaves - and although he has digressed with the content, the overall concern is still the same and we'll see that. If you look at verse 15, Paul was talking about the mixed marriage, in other words a Christian married to a non-Christian. They got married and they were both non-Christians, and then one of them was converted, and there was this situation where one was saved and one was not. Paul says in verse 15: 'But if the unbelieving depart, let him depart. A brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases: but God hath called us to peace'. In other words, if you get converted and your wife or your husband is not converted, you're to seek to live with them in harmony and peace; and if that is not

possible, the partner wants to leave and separate, you're to allow them to separate from you - but the common denominator, and the fundamental operating factor is this: that we are to live in peace.

If you become a Christian and you want to push them away because they're not a Christian, that is not living in peace - that's a recipe for war and dissension! But equally so, if they want to leave you, they want to live their own life, you're to let them go the Bible says, because that will be the only way to have peace. Now as Paul moves on from that idea of a mixed marriage, he impacts this principle: God has called us to peace. Now he picks up that theme and he presses it home, and this is the point that controls everything throughout this whole chapter 7 of 1 Corinthians. Let me show you this, remember the slogan that the Corinthians were crying in verse 1: 'It is good for a man not to touch a woman'. Some of them are married, and because of their promiscuity before marriage and even their adultery during marriage, they decided: 'Now we're converted we can't have anything to do with sexual relationships whatsoever', and they tried to sever the relationship they were in. Or, if I could put it like this to you: they sought to change their present status, and they sought to do this because they believed it would be more spiritual not to be married.

'I'm spiritual', they concluded, 'now therefore I shouldn't be in a relationship that I deem to be unspiritual'. So they saw the status of marriage, some others saw the status of celibacy, as having more religious and spiritual significance, so they sought after it to change their situation to be more spiritual. They were forced to drastic action because of this teaching they were imbibing. But Paul comes along, and has already done this, but he's really nailing it now, and brings this spiritual principle to them: stay as you are - in order to bring to their minds and hearts the true perspective of what spirituality really is. He comes to them and says: 'You say, well we've got to get divorced because we're married, and we don't think that's spiritual', other ones say: 'Well, we're going to stay celibate even though we're roaring with sexual passion, can't control our actions, because we believe it's more spiritual' - and Paul comes in and he says: 'Remain in whatever social setting you have been in at the time of your conversion'. Have you got that? Remain in whatever social setting you were found in at the time of your call.

Now let's break this up to make it more simple: God's call to be in Christ, in other words when you're saved and you hear that call of God's Holy Spirit, and you answer that invitation of grace, that salvation experience transcends the setting in which you were found at that time. What do I mean? Well, if you were an adulterer like some of these, if you were a fornicator like some of these, no matter what your background was - a thief, a murder, an extortioner, you know the list that we've come across in this epistle - that conversion experience transcends all that. When you're forgiven your calling in Christ transcends the settings and the circumstances that you were found in. But Paul tells us that not only does it transcend those circumstances, but it makes them irrelevant! Paul is saying that conversion creates such a change in the relationship that we have with God, one minute being in darkness, the next being in light; one minute being an enemy of God, the next being a friend and a son of God; that we don't need to change any of our relationships with people. Because the relationship with God has been changed so drastically we don't need to start changing our externalities around us in our settings and our circumstances. You see, even our relationships are transformed in conversion!

You might think: 'What's this boy talking about? He's going down a line here that I've never heard of'. Well, look at verse 14, you remember this mixed marriage - one's converted, one's not converted - here is the principle: 'the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband: else were your children unclean; but now are they holy'. Here's this husband saved perhaps the wife's not saved, but the wife is sanctified now in her husband, the children are now made holy in the home - they're not saved, they're not going to heaven, but because of this transcending relationship where we are transformed when we're converted into Christ, it affects our relationships without us having to do anything about it! Do you see that? You don't need to divorce the wife to make her sanctified or to make you

sanctified. You don't need to shun your children and throw them out the door, but conversion has actually changed the circumstances that you are in when you were converted!

Now why does Paul say that? This is why he says it: because you're no better off in one condition or the other. Remember we saw this in the week we spoke about celibacy and singleness? He said it's good, it is morally good for a man not to touch a woman, to remain single; but it's equally morally good to be married. One is not better than the other, one is not more spiritual than the other, and he's saying exactly the same thing here: when you're converted the relationships that you are in when you are converted are affected by your conversion, so much so that even if you weren't married to an unbeliever, even if your children weren't saved, one is not better than the other! Have you got it? It's understandable, but perhaps you envy the little Christian home - your wife or your husband is not saved, or some of your children are not saved, and you envy that, and you really feel: 'Oh, the grass is greener on that side, that's for sure'. Well, I know that desire is worthy, and I encourage you to pray for their salvation of course - but don't for one minute think that you in some way are less spiritual, and that you would be more spiritual if you had the opposite scenario! That was the mistake that they were making.

So Paul moves now from this mixed marriage to illustrate it in two other times of social conditions. He talks about circumcision and he talks about the slave. I believe that the lack of passion when he's describing these two things shows that it wasn't really a problem in Corinth, circumcision and uncircumcision, maybe slavery was a bit of a problem but I don't think it was too big a problem, because Paul's lack of passion shows me that he's only using these things as an illustration - it's as if they're already convinced about these other things, and he's using them being convinced on these things to convince them that they don't need to affect their external circumstances with regards specifically to marriage. So, the issue of concern for the Corinthians was: 'Well, we have to change our status, we have to change our situation and our circumstances', and so Paul comes and gives them an example of Judaism and the Gentiles, slaves and masters, and he comes and enshrines his whole argument in this phrase: 'Stay as you are', or a better translation, 'Remain as you were when you were called in Christ'.

Look at verse 17: 'But as God hath distributed to every man, as the Lord hath called every one, so let him walk', that word 'walk' could be translated 'let him remain as he was when he was called in Christ'. He opens the paragraph with this statement 'let him remain'; he concludes the two illustrations, circumcision in verse 20, with that same statement; and in verse 24 he closes the whole thing by saying: 'Brethren, let every man, wherein he is called, therein abide'. So I hope you're beginning to see the principle, but let's tease it out a bit more - first of all the guiding principle in verse 17. This is very easy to understand, he's saying simply: 'Live out your Christian lives in the situation where God called you, because those things are relevant to your life in Christ'. Can I put it like this, here's a paraphrase of it: 'Do not be in a hurry to change the external circumstances of your life simply because you have become a Christian' - have you got it? Don't be in a hurry to change your external circumstances, because now that you're saved your setting has become relevant to your Christianity - and the fact is this, reading between the lines, God in His sovereignty has saved you at that moment in time, in that situation, to be in that scenario for your good and the good of others.

The theme in these verses is very clear that it's the word 'calling' that's right throughout the whole passage that is central to his argument. Let me outline what he means in this. First of all 'calling' describes conversion. Remember in chapter 1 verse 9: 'God is faithful, by whom ye were called unto the fellowship of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord' - it speaks of the conversion experience. That is chiefly what this definition is within this passage. Therefore Paul is saying that when you were called, when you were saved, that call came to you as an individual personality in a given social setting. I don't know what your job is, I don't know what you were dabbling in, I don't know what your personal relationship was in the home or with a partner or whatever it may be - but in verse 18 twice, in verse 21 and 22 twice, he uses this word emphatically 'calling', to mean 'you were converted'. So when God called you and saved you in your various situations and settings,

when He saves you He renders those situations now irrelevant. In other words, it doesn't matter what your situation is, 'for when God calls you', he says, 'you're to remain in that situation'. Change is not necessary! 'Stay as you are' is the principle.

Why does he say that? Simply because you are able to live the Christian life in whatever setting the call of God took place on your life. On the other hand, because those settings are irrelevant, if they do change, a change takes place that's out of your control, or it's better for a change to take place at some time, that too is irrelevant. It's not a rule, black-and-white, but God is just saying: 'When I called you, I've called you in a particular certain situation and scenario, it's better that for the meantime you stay in that situation and don't drastically change your circumstances'. What you're not to do is seek a change as though it will have some kind of spiritual significance - Paul says it does not. Now please don't misunderstand what I'm saying, or misquote me, I'm not talking about that if you were a prostitute before you were converted, that when you're converted and God calls you you stay a prostitute, or a drunkard, or a pimp, or a racketeer, or a drug dealer, or doubtful occupations - Paul is not talking here about things that are inherently immoral, he's talking about neutral situations, domestic situations. He's talking here in a passage about marriage! That when you are called by God you are to stay in the calling that you are in, provided it's not sinful, not drastically change your circumstances or situations with the motivation that you think that you'll become more spiritual!

Paul is saying that God, by calling you in a situation, He is actually calling you to that situation - are you understanding this? The situation becomes sanctified to you, you don't need to change it! Just like the mixed marriage of the Christian husband and the Christian wife, you don't need to change your wife to one that is a Christian, she is sanctified because of what has happened to you. In a sense this means, as far as I can see, with regards to culture, custom and work that there's nothing secular any more to the believer - you can't divide the secular from the spiritual, but everything becomes spiritual to you and sanctified to you because of your changed relationship with God! The Christian life, Paul is saying, can be lived out successfully where you are when you were called - you don't have to make drastic changes like divorcing your wife, or going into a monastery, or getting circumcised if you weren't before, or deciding: 'Well, I've had enough time as a slave, and I'm a Christian now, I've got rights so I'm going to get rid of this slavery and be emancipated'.

Paul wants them to see that your faith in Christ gives significance to your social setting, the time and the place that you were saved - you don't need to change! I hope you're understanding me and not misunderstanding me, but I'm bringing this to you not to confuse you but to encourage you, and even to emancipate you. If you've been under some kind of guilt and cloud of: 'Och, if I had this', or 'If I was like this', or 'If my situation and my home scenario was like this I would be more spiritual, I would be better and more effective for God' - that is nonsense! Don't be running around trying to change your external situations with the preoccupation that you're going to become more spiritual, because it doesn't work like that! Paul is saying that it doesn't matter if you have that thing or don't have that thing, it doesn't make one iota of difference with God.

Now that is the guiding principle, I hope that's hammered out enough. But now he comes and he applies it to Jewish rites, or maybe it would be better in hindsight 'racial ties' - verses 18 and 19. Now he's not talking in a religious sense about circumcision, he's talking socially about the Jews and Gentiles: 'Is any man called being circumcised? let him not become uncircumcised. Is any called in uncircumcision? let him not be circumcised'. Paul is saying that the Gospel eliminates the situation in which you were saved, have you got that? If you were a Jew and you get saved it's irrelevant whether you were circumcised or not, it's irrelevant, the Gospel transcends all that - you don't need to go and get uncircumcised. If you're a Gentile and you're saved, that's the situation in which God called you, so you stay as a Gentile, you don't try and be a Jew!

In chapter 12 we'll see this in weeks to come, verse 13, Paul outlined this very clearly spiritually: 'For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and

have been all made to drink into one Spirit'. There's now no distinctions socially among those who are saved, the Gospel has transcended all of that and made it totally irrelevant. If you are circumcised when you were called, don't become uncircumcised, and vice versa. You might say: 'Well, that can hardly happen, if you're circumcised to become uncircumcised' - well, believe it or not, it was happening in Paul's day. There was a surgical procedure to reverse circumcision, do you know why? Because some of the Jewish businessmen, when they were in the baths with Gentiles, felt inferior, and they wanted to be like those who were 'in the world'. So they were changing their situations, the Judiasers were coming into the church and saying: 'You need to keep the law, you need to keep religious Jewish rites and be circumcised', and Gentiles after conversion were being circumcised - Paul says circumcision means nothing, as well as uncircumcision!

Don't misunderstand me again, we're talking spiritually here. It means nothing to God whether you're a Jew or a Gentile, I'm not talking prophetically here I'm talking in the light of the salvation of grace and the age of grace. It doesn't matter to God, but that doesn't mean that you cease to be a Jew or a Gentile when you get saved. I was talking to a man recently and he had an argument with a man who said once a Jew is converted he ceases to be a Jew - that's exactly what Paul is saying is not happening! That doesn't happen, you still are ethnically a Jew and racially a Jew, but what Paul is saying is: it's irrelevant spiritually what nationality you are, what you are socially doesn't matter to God, and that's why you don't need to change it, you don't need to affect any external changes in your circumstances. Changing doesn't make a difference, it wasn't a religious point it's a social point.

It's interesting that he makes no exceptions here as he does in the rest of the passage, because there are no exceptions to the Gospel - you're either saved or lost. What you are socially or racially or ethnically doesn't mean one pick or iota of credit with God. It's a gospel of grace, and that's why Paul was so hard and determined on it. You might say to me: 'In Acts 16 verse 3 Paul got Timothy circumcised', that's right, he did! Do you know why he got him circumcised? He got him circumcised for a pragmatic reason, because those he was going to witness to wouldn't have even listened to Timothy. But then, when there are Jews saying: 'Well, it does affect you spiritually whether you're circumcised or not', when the Jews started to make it of religious significance whether to do this or not, Paul is vehement in his opposition of it. He's not making rules here, he's not saying you can't do it and you can do it, he's saying make sure you don't do it - whether it's getting married or not married, becoming a slave or not a slave, becoming circumcised or not circumcised, Jew or Gentile - don't do it if you think it's going to make you more spiritual, because it's not!

I wish we had the time to look at Galatians, because it's all outlined there, but what Paul is just saying is that it doesn't count spiritually. Verse 19: 'Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but the keeping of the commandments of God'. How astounding! If you were a Jew, and you heard this great Jew, Paul the apostle, speaking and saying: 'Circumcision is nothing', you would be devastated! Because for the Jew, circumcision was everything - it was a sign of God's covenant with His people, but Paul could see the danger it was to the gospel of grace, and I believe the Corinthians were able to see it - that's why he's using this example. It's a danger, you're not to see this as making you more spiritual. Now Paul says: 'You can see that, can't you, Corinthians? Now apply it to marriage, now apply it to your relationships - here it is: marriage is nothing, celibacy is nothing, because they all belong to the categories that are irrelevant!'

Paul doesn't want to be misunderstood, like I don't, but he often was, and I'm sure I will be too! He says at the end: 'but the keeping of the commandments of God' - now that doesn't mean circumcision or uncircumcision, it's a bad translation. What it's saying is this: what really counts is not circumcision or uncircumcision, not the sociological conditions, but what counts is the commandments of God! He sees the commandments of God not as the ritualistic ceremonial keeping of the law, but rather as the ethical life of the blameless, perfect believer in holiness and righteousness of God in a world that is dying and damned - that's what he sees as important! You see, the danger was that these antinomian Christians in Corinth, that means people that didn't believe in the law - in other words, they thought they could do absolutely

everything, every sin going - he didn't want to give them some kind of a licence and say: 'Well, it doesn't matter whether you keep the commandments of God or not'. He wants them to know that these ritual things are irrelevant, the situations you find yourself in when you're saved are irrelevant - but that doesn't negate us from keeping the commandments of God as Christians.

Then after he applies this to Jewish racial ties, he applies it to the social situation in verses 20 to 24. Again 'calling' here doesn't mean if you're called to be a slave, in other words that's your calling and vocation - that's not what it means, it means if you're called to be a Christian when you're a slave, that's the sense of the Greek there. You're to live out your Christian calling in Christ in the situation of your calling vocationally, where God has called you in Christ, you're to stay in that situation because your Christian faith sanctifies your vocational calling. Notice the difference of how he says this here, he doesn't say 'Stay as you are', but he says 'Don't let it trouble you'. If you're called in the Lord being a servant, verse 21, 'care not for it' - that doesn't mean 'don't care two hoots about it', it means don't be anxious, don't let the thing trouble you that you're now a Christian and you're also still a slave.

Why does he not say 'stay as you are'? Simply because you have no choice but to stay as you are if you're a slave, it's not in your hands, it's in your master's hands. But what Paul is saying is: whether he lets you free, or whether he keeps you, don't let it trouble you. It's the same point made in a different way, but he gives an exception and he says, verse 21: 'but if thou mayest be made free, use it rather'. In other words, if you're a slave and you're kept a slave, well don't worry about it, be content; but if you're made free use the opportunity for freedom for the best of your ability. So you see that this is the rule that he's laying down, that you have to do this and you can do that, but he's saying: whatever way you're called, stay in that calling, and if there's an occasion to better your circumstance that's the exception - but realise that you can be a Christian in the very situation in which God has saved you, in which you're in tonight, apart from sin of course, you can thrive as a child of God and God can bless you, and you don't need to change your externalities to be more spiritual.

When God called you, you aren't given a new occupation, but your old occupation is given a new significance - that's what Paul is saying. Let's break this down so that we understand it. Let's look at the first illustration again, circumcision. To the circumcised, Paul says, don't change your situation if you're circumcised. To the uncircumcised he says the same thing, don't change your situation. What's the reason for saying those two same things to two different situations? Because neither of them counts spiritually with God, they don't make any difference. What's Paul's conclusion? Stay in your call, stay as you are. The second illustration is slavery. To the slave he says, don't be concerned about your situation as a slave. He gives an exception: if freedom is granted, make use of your freedom. What's the reason that they should be content as slaves? One: because to the slave, you need to know that spiritually you are free in the Lord Jesus Christ - verse 22: 'For he that is called in the Lord, being a servant, is the Lord's freeman'. It doesn't matter that you're found as a slave when you become a Christian, because you're free in Christ. To the free person he says: 'Well, if you're a Christian...ye are bought with a price', verse 23, 'be not ye the servants of men'. In other words, you're Christ's servant, at the end of verse 22, you're Christ's slave. So even if you have freedom from slavery, don't forget that it doesn't make a difference because you're still Christ's slave! Do you see that?

The conclusion in it all is: stay in the calling where God saved you in the first place. Let's wrap it all up with an application, because it's so important that we know what Paul is saying to us today. It's simply this: Christians are needed everywhere. Christians are needed in every situation, among people who are servants, among the masters, among workers and employers, the poor as well as the rich, the lowly as well as the high. The Christian life, the beauty of it, is that it is designed to operate on every level of humanity! That's why external changes don't need to be made - as one author said: 'Christianity does not create an artificial greatness, but teaches that true greatness is in humble places. After all, true greatness does not consist in doing great things, but rather doing little things in great ways'.

The world is full tonight of men who are abject slaves to passion and habit because of so-called freedom. They may be monarchs in the eyes of men, but before God they are menial slaves to sin, and the last word that God leaves to us - all of us, no matter where we find ourselves tonight, is: 'Brethren', verse 24, 'let every man, wherein he is called, therein abide with God'. Are you a mother changing nappies, filling baby's bottles? Are you a mother of teenagers, and your heart's being broken, and you wish that they were grown-up, and you wish perhaps that you could get away from it all? Are you a housewife, and when you're at the kitchen sink, you think: 'Is there not more purpose to my life than this? Is there nothing more that I can achieve for God, for myself, or for my family?'" Maybe you're fed up being a teacher, lack of discipline; or you're a banker, or a lawyer, or a labourer, and you would long to be something else - listen, this is what Christianity is! Let every man abide as he is when he's called, for he can abide with God in it! No matter how menial it is, if you add God to your life you immediately subtract all the evils. No matter where you are, no matter what you're doing, the proverb is true that you can bloom where God has planted you - for that's where God has called you! You don't need to take drastic actions to alter your circumstances, thinking that it will make a difference and you'll be more spiritual - it won't do that, and it certainly won't bring more joy to you.

Listen to what Robinson Crusoe says - a great scholar he is, on his deserted island, after his heart had been changed by finding a Bible in a chest and opening it up and reading it - it had been salvaged from the shipwreck. This is what he wrote: 'I learned to look more upon the bright side of my situation and less upon the dark side; and to consider what I enjoyed rather than what I wanted. This gave me sometimes such secret comforts that I cannot express them, and which I take notice here to put those discontented people in mind of that, who cannot enjoy comfortably what God has given them because they see and covet something that He has not given them. All our discontents about what we want appeared to me to spring from the want of thankfulness for what we have'. What situation do you find yourself in? I know it's not the most desirable, I know you wouldn't have planned it that way, I know you didn't even choose it, but contentment is realising that God has already provided everything we need for our present happiness.

Listen to this story: once upon a time there was a stonecutter who lived alone. Though he had acquired great skills he was very poor, he lived in a tiny bamboo hut and wore tattered clothing. One day as a stonecutter he worked with his hammer and chisel upon a huge stone, and he heard a crowd gathering along streets. By their shouts he could tell that the King was coming to visit his humble village, and joining in the procession the stonecutter gazed in awe as the king, dressed in marvellous silk, was greeted by his subjects. 'Oh, how I wish I had the power and glory of the King', he thought, 'He has soldiers at his command, there is no-one more powerful than the King'. His cry was heard in heaven, and immediately the humble stonecutter was transformed into a powerful King. He found himself riding on a great horse, waving at the crowds of people who had flocked to see him. 'This is power', he thought. As the summer progressed, however, the new king watched the effects of the heat upon his people. Men and animals became weary in the summer sun, the plants withered under the powerful rays of the sun, and as he looked at the sky the new king realised that the sun was more powerful than the earthly rulers. 'How I wish I were as powerful as that', he thought, 'I wish I were the sun'. Immediately his wish was granted, and the stonecutter relished his new role as the sun. He gloried in the power he felt as he surveyed the kingdoms below. He sent his bright rays to the earth, he watched kings and princes hide under their parasols, he watched as powerful warriors became weak under his gaze, even the crops in the field were under his command. Then one day a tiny cloud moved over the land, shielding the earth from the sun's bright rays. Seeing that here was something more powerful, he thought: 'I want very much to be a cloud'. Again his wish was granted, he blocked the sun himself - he felt so important, he gathered all his strength becoming a gigantic cloud, and he began to pour down rain on the earth. Rivers that were formed previously were no more, and water flooded the streets of the cities and the farmland - everything, trees, animals, people, seemed to be awed by his power. Only the massive rocks were unswayed. Again he had discovered something more powerful than he - 'There is nothing', he thought, 'as

powerful as a rock, how I wish I were a huge stone' - and his wish was granted. As a stone, there he sat in the countryside, motionless and powerful, unmoved by sun or wind or rain - and he felt exempt from all the forces that shaped the existence of those around him. Then one day a man approached carrying a bag. When he stopped, he pulled out a chisel and a hammer, and he began to chip away at the rock. Realising that the man with the tools was more powerful than any rock, he cried out: 'Oh, I want to be a stonecutter'. Once again the heavens heard his cry, and he became a stonecutter; once again he lived in a bamboo hut and made his living with hammer and chisel - but this time he was content.

Hebrews says: 'Let your conversation be without covetousness, and be content with such things as ye have; for whatever they are, He has said: 'I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee''.

Father, we pray that You will help us to effect the changes that we can, which are internal changes. But Lord, help us to accept those things that we cannot change, those situations that we may have found ourselves in when we were converted, and have been such a pain and a burden to us. Perhaps, our Father, we've looked over the fence and said: 'Oh, if I could be like them', but Lord, You know and Your word has taught us tonight that that is foolish, for we are in Christ and Christ is in God, and we have all things. Lord, I just pray tonight that you would lift the burden from some souls here tonight - those who are striving for something that they think is spirituality, that cannot be achieved, that they would accept the grace of God and all the riches that are in Him now. Help us, our Father, not to lose the joys of today for discontent about tomorrow. Let us realise that at this moment we have everything that we need to be satisfied in Him. Take us now to our homes, we pray, for Christ's sake, Amen.

Transcribed by Andrew Watkins, Preach The Word - March 2003

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Marriage And Singleness - Chapter 4

"Advantages Of Singlehood And Advice For Widowhood"

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I Corinthians 7:25-40

1. ***The Benefits Of A Single Life***
 - a. **Fewer External Pressures (verses 25-27)**
 - b. **Fewer Internal Problems (verse 28)**
 - c. **Fewer Temporal Preoccupations (verses 29-38)**
 - i. Less distraction away from spiritual things
 - ii. More concentration on spiritual things
2. ***The Bounds Of Married Life***
 - a. **Duration: Life (verse 39a)**
 - b. **Termination: Death (verse 39b)**
 - c. **Exhortation: Stay as you are (verses 40)**

Turn with me to 1 Corinthians chapter 7, we're reading from verse 25 tonight - and God willing, if time permits, we hope to finish this chapter which we've spent several weeks in looking at the subject of marriage, and many other related subjects which come within the boundary, if you like, of relationships, and man and woman intimacies.

Verse 25 through to the end of the chapter: "Now concerning virgins", or that could be translated 'unmarried', "I have no commandment of the Lord: yet I give my judgment, as one that hath obtained mercy of the Lord to be faithful". Paul's just saying there, as we've seen already in this passage, that Paul himself was a single man. We looked into all the various arguments as to whether he was married at one point or not, and if you want to know that - I believe, personally, that he was not married, or at least he had been married at some time, he's not married in this chapter that's for sure. It was not necessary for the apostle to be married, and certainly as he writes this he wants all believers as far as is possible to be unmarried if that is possible for you - i.e. if you have the gift of celibacy which he has already talked about. But even he, who had the gift of celibacy, recognises in verse 25 that it's because of the mercy of the Lord that he has been able to be faithful in his singlehood. That's what we will all need, whatever our circumstances are - whether we find ourselves divorced, singled, widowed, whatever the capacity is in which we live, we need the faithful mercy of God as our portion.

Verse 26: "I suppose therefore that this is good for the present distress, I say, that it is good for a man so to be" - for a man to remain single. "Art thou bound unto a wife? seek not to be loosed. Art thou loosed from a wife? seek not a wife. But and if thou marry, thou hast not sinned; and if a virgin marry, she hath not sinned. Nevertheless such shall have trouble in the flesh: but I spare you. But this I say, brethren, the time is short: it remaineth, that both they that have wives be as though they had none; And they that weep, as though they wept not; and they that rejoice, as though they rejoiced not; and they that buy, as though they possessed not; And they that use this world, as not abusing it: for the fashion of this world passeth away. But I would have you without carefulness. He that is unmarried careth for the things that belong to the Lord, how he may please the Lord: But he that is married careth for the things that are of the world, how he may please his wife. There is difference also between a wife and a virgin. The unmarried woman careth for the things of the

Lord, that she may be holy both in body and in spirit: but she that is married careth for the things of the world, how she may please her husband. And this I speak for your own profit; not that I may cast a snare", or a noose, "upon you, but for that which is comely, and that ye may attend upon the Lord without distraction. But if any man think that he behaveth himself uncomely toward his virgin, if she pass the flower of her age, and need so require, let him do what he will, he sinneth not: let them marry. Nevertheless he that standeth stedfast in his heart, having no necessity, but hath power over his own will, and hath so decreed in his heart that he will keep his virgin, doeth well. So then he that giveth her in marriage doeth well; but he that giveth her not in marriage doeth better. The wife is bound by the law as long as her husband liveth; but if her husband be dead, she is at liberty to be married to whom she will; only in the Lord. But she is happier if she so abide, after my judgment: and I think also that I have the Spirit of God".

A little girl on one occasion was caught eavesdropping through the keyhole of her spinster aunt. As she was kneeling down there her mother caught her, and said: 'Dear, you should not eavesdrop, it's wrong to eavesdrop'. 'But Mummy', she said, 'Aunt Emma ended her prayers so funny!'. 'What did she say?', said the mother. 'Well, when she finished praying she said, 'World without men, O me!'. For many single people, world without men, or world without women, is the prospect that they have for the rest of their days - but whether it is singlehood, widowhood, or even indeed marriage, Paul has a great deal to say to us in these verses that we're looking at tonight from verse 25 to 40. We're going to see this evening the advantages of singlehood, but also some advice to those found in widowhood. I believe that all of the principles and the guidelines and precepts that you will find apply to singlehood and widowhood in this passage, many of them can be applied to marriage - indeed, in any circumstance in which we find ourselves. The reason why that is, is that the issue that Paul primarily is dealing with is how we can serve the Lord most effectively. No matter what situation or capacity we find ourselves, how we can, to the best of our ability, use our energies, use the gifts that God has given us, use the opportunities and the circumstances that God's providence has led us into for the full extent of service that we can bring to the Lord Jesus Christ.

The two specific cases that we are given tonight is: if you have the gift of singleness, and if you want find out what that is look at the previous tape that we did - the tape people up in the upper room will give you help there - we looked at how the gift of singleness is something that is given by God, and if you don't have that gift of singleness you can't expect to live a celibate life. Paul is saying here tonight that if you have that gift of singleness, you should serve the Lord without the distraction of marriage - but if you haven't the gift of singleness, well then you should serve the Lord without the distractions of frustrated sexual appetites, you should get married. If it's not your gift to be single, get married and serve the Lord as best as you can in the marriage bond.

But the general rule that we're going to see bore out by the apostle in this passage is that, whatever capacity we find ourselves in, we're to make sure that we put all our energies, times and gifts into serving the Lord to the best of our ability. The reason why we're to do that is found in verse 29: 'But this I say, brethren, the time is short' - the time is short! The time is short in which we have to live, specifically the time was short for these Corinthian believers - we'll see why that is a little bit later - but even if we take it for ourselves, in our own situation, the time is short, as we all know, for Jesus is coming back again. We're instructed in the New Testament to look for the glorious appearing and imminent return of the Lord Jesus. Whether the Lord calls us to be with Himself through death, or whether He bursts through the clouds and brings us to the air to be with Himself, the time is short - and because the time is short, Paul says, whether we're married, whether we're single, whether we're virgins, engaged or widowed, whatever capacity and situation we find ourselves in: we're to use everything that God has given us in His grace, and the circumstances we find ourselves in, to the glory of God to the best of our ability.

So my question right at the outset of our study tonight is: are we doing all in our power to serve the Lord? I want to be absolutely sure that I am not talking about being a pastor, so-called, or an elder, or a deacon, or a

missionary, or an evangelist, or a full-time children's worker, or whatever label you want to put on this - we've got to get away from this ecclesiasticism of thinking of clergy and laity, that there are people in the pew who listen, and there are people in the pulpit who work. As far as the New Testament is concerned every child of God born-again is a worker, and is a servant of Jesus Christ. We all have a responsibility to serve the Lord in whatever capacity He has called us in.

If you go to your average Christian bookshop you'll find that there's a lot of literature on the shelves and resources giving advice and counsel on Christian marriage - but there's very little about being single as a Christian. Even that which there is concerning being single as a Christian, of what there is the theme often is: 'how to cope with being single'. The insinuation, almost, behind the writing of these books is that being single is a predicament, that it's like a disease, it's second-best, you haven't got your goal or achieved what you really wanted. This is completely and entirely contrary to scripture! We only need to look at this portion of Scripture, in verse 1 Paul said: 'It is good if a man doesn't touch a woman' - 'calos' (sp?), 'it is morally good' if a man doesn't get married, it's as good as being married. In verse 7 he expresses the desire: 'For I would that all men were even as I myself'. He acknowledges that not all have that gift, but he wishes in verse 8: 'I say therefore to the unmarried and widows, It is good for them if they abide even as I'.

I don't know what your situation is as you've gathered here tonight, but I'm aware that some of you are single, and some of you may find yourself in a single capacity - but the word of God is not despising this in any shape or form, and in fact we'll see tonight that there are benefits of a single life, and you're not to view a single life as a problem. It's not something to cope with, but the single life, Paul says, is a gift from God! It is something that we are to embrace, not as a consolation prize, but as a high calling of God which He can use for His glory in a way that He cannot use married couples. Let's see tonight the reasons why the single life and singlehood is a benefit.

Look at verse 25: 'Now concerning virgins', I already said that this verse means 'unmarried', it can mean male or female. The word itself probably is referring specifically to females, but we can take the general meaning tonight and apply it to all who are unmarried, man or woman. He's coming to widows later in verses 39 and 40, we'll see that in a few moments later on in our service, but all these truths can be applied to single people, male, female, to widows, to widowers - and really to anyone, even those in our contemporary situation who find themselves single through divorce of no fault of their own. Paul says: 'I am teaching you here, not in a commandment of the Lord: yet I give my judgment', or my opinion, 'as one that hath obtained mercy of the Lord to be faithful'. Now we saw in previous verses, such as verse 10 and verse 12, that when Paul says: 'I'm giving this not in commandment, not of the Lord', it doesn't mean that he's not inspired, or that he doesn't have any authority to say what he's saying. He's simply saying that the Lord Jesus in the Gospels had nothing to say about virgins and those who were unmarried, He didn't specifically teach anything concerning this situation - but yet Paul, as he brings us this teaching, is giving us his opinion as the apostle of God with apostolic authority, and we know later on in verse 40 that he not only gives it with his apostolic authority, but verbal inspiration - because God's Holy Spirit has given us these verses as His holy Word.

I believe that, although Paul is saying that the Lord didn't give any specific instructions and teaching with regard to singlehood and virgins, Paul is probably also alluding to something that the Lord Jesus did say. I want you to turn with me to Matthew 19 verse 12, of course His disciples said to Him in verse 10: 'If the case of the man be so with his wife, it is not good to marry'. In other words, He's been outlining how marriage is permanent - we'll see that again in verses 39 and 40, and how there's no grounds for divorce whatsoever, apart from the betrothal period within the Jewish culture that we find in Matthew's gospel. This can be seen and evidenced in the fact of the reaction the disciples bring: 'Well, if that's the case of a man with his wife, it's better not to marry!'. 'But he said unto them, All men cannot receive this saying, save they to whom it is given. For there are some eunuchs, which were so born from their mother's womb: and there are some eunuchs, which were made eunuchs of men: and there be eunuchs, which have made themselves eunuchs for

the kingdom of heaven's sake. He that is able to receive it, let him receive it'. This is a gift from God, and some people have decided that they will not get married, and they've been able to contain themselves for God, for His kingdom, and for the glory of the Gospel - even the Lord says that not all can receive this saying.

So this isn't a commandment that Paul is giving us tonight, saying that we ought to all stay single, but what he does say is that it's trustworthy advice. He's giving his opinion, and don't forget that he's inspired by the Spirit of God. He's saying to us, as we've seen right throughout this chapter, that being single is not more spiritual than being married, and being married is not more spiritual than being single - but there is one scenario within the present historical church situation that, as far as Paul is concerned, makes more sense. There is not one that's morally better than the other, but as we find from verse 26: 'I suppose therefore that this is good', that a man or woman remain single, 'for the present distress, I say, that it is good for a man so to be'. So we've seen already that one is not morally superior to the other, one is not more spiritual than the other, but for some reason Paul says - because of what's going on, the present distress - it makes more sense, and my qualified trustworthy opinion to you is that it's better, if you are single, to remain single for the present distress.

Of course we have to find out what this present distress is, and the Greek word simply means 'a stress', a literal stress or a calamity. Because this calamity is described as being 'present', we have to discern that it is something that was going on within the Corinthian society at that very moment that Paul was writing to them. In fact one modern translation translates it like this: 'the impending distress' - not just something that was going on at that minute, but something that the apostle thought was going to get worse and worse and worse, to such an extent that it was better for believers who find themselves single to stay single because of the impending distress. Now if you're familiar with any sort or form of church history, you will know that even as Paul was writing to the Corinthians there were believers being imprisoned, arrested, beaten, and even martyred for their faith in the Lord Jesus - all in fulfilment of the words of the Lord Jesus Christ. He told them in John 16: 'They shall put you out of the synagogues: yea, the time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God a service'.

What is this impending distress Paul talks about? Well I believe that one of the things, at least, he's speaking of is the first phase, if you like, of the Roman persecution begun under Nero. Many of you will know of Nero, of course he was the Emperor when Rome burnt, and of course he had a hand in the burning down of Rome - he got so intoxicated with his own power. Ten years after Paul wrote the first epistle to the Corinthians, he began to almost, some would say, lose his mind with regards to persecuting Christians - so much so that he refined the torture of Christians into a diabolical art. His name 'Nero' became synonymous with sadistic torture. We read in history books of Christians being sewn into animal skins and thrown to wild dogs, and being torn apart, eaten live, and left unburied, dead. We read of Christians being dressed in clothes that were soaked in wax, and then hung up in Nero's gardens and set alight as human torches, burnt alive. We also read in Foxe's Book of Martyrs that in the very city of Corinth there was a man who was the treasurer of the city, we find him in Romans chapter 16 verse 23, probably an early convert of the apostle Paul - his name was Erastus - and we find that he was martyred in Rome for the Lord Jesus Christ under these persecutions of Nero. So we see the immediate situation that these Christians were living in, and as the 10 years of Nero's persecutions went through, and as the greater phases of his persecutions were executed, you would be able to discern - wouldn't you, I hope - that it was difficult to be a Christian in first century society. If it was difficult to be a single Christian, in other words no family or marital ties, how much more difficult would it be to be a married Christian with a family going through persecution?

All would suffer - if your husband was put in prison, you would suffer, wouldn't you, and the children would suffer? If your wife was put to death, the children would suffer the loss of their mother; and if one was beaten another would suffer in the family; if one was tortured another would feel the anguish of it. If the

father was taken away who would care for the family? Who would teach the children the things of God, which is the father's duty? Who would care for the mother and comfort her in the difficulties and in the distresses? What I want you to see this evening is what Paul is addressing: practical problems arise when you decide you're no longer going to be single in this situation, you're going to get married. Not only do practical problems arise, but your ministry's effectiveness decreases. Because you have these problems of family, worrying about others, being responsible for your children and food on the table and so on, it can also decrease your ministry's effectiveness. You can't just run away and hide from the Roman government, you can't decide to be a hero for Christ with a band of Christians - and therefore, Paul is saying, if there is a time when you find yourself single, to stay as you are. That time was the impending distress that we read of here in verse 26.

Leon Morris put it well when he said: 'When high seas are raging, it is no time for changing ships'. When high seas are raging, it is no time for changing ships! Let me illustrate this for you in this way: some of you can remember World War II, the outbreak of it. You will remember that Adolf Hitler's troops got through Belgian and eventually came to the border of France, and the day came when those Panther tanks went over the Belgian border into France and went through the nation of France like a flaming fire. We read in our history books that in 40 days those Panther tanks of Hitler were in the French capital, Paris. There is a book written: '40 Days That Shook The World', and in 40 days the nation of France was taken over by the Nazis. I want you to imagine this in your mind for a moment, villages being plundered and destroyed, homes being crushed, great cities within France being destroyed, family being smashed, tanks rolling down main roads, the French people running for their lives! The French were really put to the test - but what I want you to grasp in your mind is mothers running down the lanes and the streets of French towns and villages with babies in their arms, fathers trying to hide their sons. The question I'm wanting you to answer is this: is that type of situation and time in history a time, men, for you to get down on your knees and propose marriage? It's not, is it? It's not the right scenario or situation, and I imagine - I don't know this for a fact - but if you were to go back to the records of the marriages that took place in this particular era in French history, you'll find that there were very few. The impending present distress necessitated that the people weren't thinking about those things, they were running for their lives!

Maybe some of you who are so zealous are thinking to yourself: 'Oh, have I made a mistake? I've went and got married, and I could do more for the Lord if I wasn't married, and maybe my reward would be greater in heaven' - listen: don't misunderstand what we're saying this evening. Singleness is not more spiritual than marriage; marriage is not more spiritual than singleness; but what the Bible is saying is that there are certain things you can do as a single man or woman that you cannot do as a married man or woman with children. Don't say: 'I wish I weren't married', unless you've got good reason for saying that! But this is what Paul says, he anticipates this question in our minds perhaps, verse 27: 'Art thou bound unto a wife? seek not to be loosed'. The danger is that you say: 'Alright! I'll get divorced' - that's what these Corinthians were doing - 'I can serve the Lord better if I don't have a wife or husband'. No: 'Art thou bound unto a wife? seek not to be loosed. Art thou loosed from a wife? seek not a wife. The present distress really necessitates, if you want to take my good advice, stay as you are!'

Now can I just make a bit of a detour for one moment, because I think this is tremendous pastoral advice the apostle gives here. We've seen this as we've gone through this epistle, how Paul has such balance when it comes to pastoral counselling. I learnt very early on, and I think that it was a good lesson that I've used since, that it's a good practice when you find yourself in a moment of distress and calamity and turmoil, not to make rash decisions or quick decisions - because when you're in an emotional turmoil usually your mind is not the clearest. That is exactly what the apostle is saying here: let the air sit, let the mist of battle and persecution fall before you make a rash decision - if you're married don't seek a divorce; if you are unmarried, don't look for a wife - it's clear and plain, isn't it?

He's saying: 'Cherish your singleness'. If you're single, see it as a blessing from God, take its advantages because its advantages are many. I want to proclaim tonight to you, if you are single and you find yourself in that situation, and the large pressure of society makes you feel like some kind of second-class citizen and leper, you have been given a gift by God that not many are given! There is still the gift of singleness, and can I say in a prophetic note that when we read in Matthew 24 of some of the things that will befall this earth: persecutions, earthquakes, wars and rumours of wars, pestilence, famines, all sorts of deaths, there is coming a day even before the rapture of Jesus Christ when I believe that as these birth pangs come upon the scene of this earth that it may necessitate that some believers - certainly some are tonight at this very moment in countries where they're being persecuted - rather to choose singleness than marriage, because of the impending distress.

If you have this gift thank God for it, and use it. Now I want you to see tonight, that's the first thing: you will have fewer external pressures in the impending distress, you'll not have to worry about the persecution among your family and your children, but you'll just be looking after yourself towards God and the cause of Christ. The second benefit of a single life is fewer internal problems, not just external pressures, but internal problems. Paul says that it's not wrong to get married, verse 28: 'If thou marry, thou hast not sinned; and if a virgin marry, she hath not sinned. Nevertheless such shall have trouble in the flesh: but I would spare you'. If you don't get married you will have fewer internal problems.

Now what does he mean when he says 'trouble in the flesh'? When he talks about 'flesh', he's not talking in the spiritual sense about the old Adamic nature, our sinful flesh theologically. He's talking about circumstances of life that will come upon you if you find yourself a family man or woman in persecution circumstances. You see, you can be stronger in persecution if you're single, you can stand up in a greater way for Christ, and do greater things for Christ if you haven't to worry about the ramifications for your family, your wife, or your children. So Paul says you have less trouble in the flesh, but on a practical note, of course, I think he's also talking about the natural problems of marriage. We saw in previous studies that whenever a young man or young woman find themselves with these natural sexual appetites, Paul says that the way for an outlet for these appetites is to be married, and God has blessed marriage in such a capacity. Although marriage solves many problems, you have to realise that marriage creates problems as well. Maybe it creates more than it solves for some people, because when two people come together the problems of human nature are intensified - you've got two sinful human natures that are coming together as one person. Both of them still have their own characteristics, their own emotions, their own temperaments, and their own wills and ways. They are two sinners, and no matter how holy they are as Christians, they still have pride, there's dishonesty deep down in their heart, there is thoughtlessness and selfishness - and this may even be increased if the other partner is an unbeliever. It's not always the case, but it could be the case.

So what Paul is saying here is: not only can you be a better Christian in persecution if you're single, but you have to realise that marriage in itself often causes hardships. There are sacrifices that are called for, you have to adjust yourself in ways that singleness doesn't call you to do. Let me say, young people, that sexual problems aren't necessarily solved through marriage - although marriage is the only legal and lawful, before God, outlet for sexual passion - it is not always the solving feature, because perhaps the worst sexual organ that we have a problem with in our bodies is our minds. Marriage will not solve a problem that is in your mind. Of course, many people may get married because they are lonely - but as the divorce courts testify today, some carry their loneliness into marriage and end up making the other person lonely when they eventually leave them.

If you're sitting here single, and you think you've got problems being single, Paul is saying to you tonight that you need to realise that if you get married you'll have more problems. Not the same problems, but problems of a different kind. Don't think that the grass is greener on the other side. As Warren Wiersbe has said: 'The cheapest thing is the marriage licence, and then the price goes up'. That's so true, and many

historians, Christian historians, think that Wesley and Whitfield would have been better off if they had remained unmarried. Now don't misunderstand what I'm saying here tonight, I'm saying that if you have been given by God the gift of singleness, supernaturally as a gift of the Holy Spirit, the best life that you can live is a single life - but if you're not given that gift, you can't live the single life, and you must live the married life. But whether you live the single life or the married life, you're to do all to the glory of God!

Let me encourage those who are married, as I encourage myself for a moment here tonight: there is the capacity in marriage to glorify God, and to work together with God pulling the family toward God rather than pulling the family in two directions. This is very important, because we live in a society today where selfish marriage is the norm; where you just set up a little home - us four and no more, or whatever it is - and you live in your domestic affluent capacity, and have no thought of God, even as Christians, but just provide for yourself. Now marriage can be the most useful of unions for God, or it can fall into the category of being the most selfish partnership on the face of God's earth. There's something to learn for us all tonight: if you remain single there will be fewer pressures, there will be fewer internal problems - but thirdly: there will be fewer temporal preoccupations.

Paul says that the time is short, verse 31: 'this world, the fashion of this world, passeth away'. The word for 'fashion' is 'form', the Greek word 'schema' - and what Paul is saying here is: 'Marriage is not an eternal thing'. Marriage will not last for all eternity, it will pass away - the word used for 'pass away' was used in the theatre of the changing of scenes. There's going to be a day when there will be no more marriage. Remember the Lord Jesus was asked the question about someone who had married several times, their partner had died, whose wife will she be in heaven? And Jesus said: 'In heaven we will neither marry nor be given in marriage like the angels are' - I'm not entering into what capacity we will know our husbands and wives, the Bible is largely silent on these things, and I wish to be silent too. But although marriages may be 'made in heaven', what the word of God is saying here is that they will not be carried over into heaven in the capacity that we know them here today. This world will pass away, the scene will change, and marriage will pass away also.

This phrase 'time is short', could be translated 'time has been shortened', and I think what Paul is saying here for these persecuted Christians, for many of them, they're suffering premature deaths - I don't mean that they have died before their time, what I mean is that they have died young men and women because of this persecution. The time has been shortened. Life at best is very brief, but when we consider how our lives could be taken one day in persecution, and how some believers are being martyrs and laying down their lives for Christ as we speak, and as we also realise that we're in the end times and the hastening of the Lord Jesus is coming very soon, Paul is saying: 'In the light of all these things, I want you to do five things - no matter what capacity you find yourself in relationships'.

Here's the first thing, verse 29: 'both they that have wives be as though they had none'. That's the first thing that he wants: they that have wives must be as though they had none. Now, what he's really saying here is that a husband is to behave as if he's on military service - you've seen it on the news here, the folk going in boats and ships over to the Gulf, and their wives waving. They've to go maybe for months, perhaps years, but they're prepared to go - that's what Paul is saying here. There are sacrifices that need to be made. Turn with me for a moment to 2 Samuel chapter 11, this is the story of David - and you'll remember that he committed adultery with Bathsheba, Uriah's wife. He decides to con Uriah, make him drunk, and also send him to the front line of the battle so that he's murdered - but Uriah, in this, was a more righteous man than David. In verse 11 we find, verse 10: 'And when they had told David, saying, Uriah went not down unto his house, David said unto Uriah, Camest thou not from thy journey? why then didst thou not go down unto thine house? And Uriah said unto David, The ark, and Israel, and Judah, abide in tents; and my lord Joab, and the servants of my lord, are encamped in the open fields; shall I then go into mine house, to eat and to drink, and to lie with my wife? as thou livest, and as thy soul liveth, I will not do this thing'. He was a soldier when he

was at home, as well as when he was on the battlefield, and he knew that his brothers were on the battlefield laying down their lives - as we know that some of our brothers and sisters are laying down their life for Christ - he wasn't prepared to live it up! He was a soldier.

Now this doesn't mean that we neglect our husbands or our wives, of course the rest of Paul's epistles that we've studied on many occasions tell us that that is not an option. We're reprobates and evil, the word of God says, if we don't provide for our own and those of our own household - but what Paul is telling us, and we need to hear it in our materialistic affluent society today, is that the Lord's work must come first! You don't often hear that, what you hear today is: 'The Lord comes first, then the family comes next, and then the Lord's work comes next' - I don't know where that order comes from, in fact I don't think there ought to be any order whatsoever, because if the Lord is first in your life your family will be up there too, and the work of the Lord will be up there. You don't need to make a top ten of things to do! What Paul is saying is that the Lord's claims are paramount, and marriage is no excuse for reducing the Lord's work. You wife, your husband, whatever your relationship is, it ought to be a help to you not a hindrance in the work of God!

We need to hear this today, and I'm never going to get through all of this chapter tonight, but I want us to really ponder this: are you a help or a hindrance to your husband or wife in the things of God? A Scottish preacher, a well-known one, on one occasion was experiencing public criticism because of a stand he was taking biblically. Almost every day there were negative reports of him in the newspapers. A friend asked him: 'How are you able to carry on in the face of this opposition?', and he replied quietly: 'I am happy at home'. Now, that means a lot, to be happy at home, but Paul is saying that you can't put the temporal over the eternal. What he's calling on wives to do is to stand beside your husbands in the work of the Lord! I believe the insinuation right throughout the Scriptures is, that if you can find within yourself to do this, you will share in the reward of your husband at the judgement seat.

If I can cast your mind back to whenever David spoke words concerning those that were abiding with the stuff, that's the way he said it, the soldiers were on the battlefield but there were those who were left behind in the camp looking after the goods and the weapons. He said of those that abide with the stuff: 'he will have his part with he that goeth down to battle, so shall his part be that tarrieth by the stuff'. I know, maybe when you're at home, wives, maybe even husbands, and your partner is out serving the Lord - and they're maybe out serving the Lord an awful lot, and at times you feel the spirit of resentment welling up within your heart. You think to yourself: 'Well, why can't I be out there doing as they're doing? Why can't I have a purpose like they have a purpose?' - will you see this? That there's a day coming when your partner will stand at the judgement seat of Christ, and if you've stood with them and supported them and stayed with the stuff the reward will be split! Is that not encouraging? I wonder, I just wonder, whether those in the shadows and behind-the-scenes will have the greater part?

That's what Paul says for those that are as they are married, they're to behave as if they are not married. Then it says: 'And they that weep, as though they wept not', sorrow must not be allowed to engulf the soul so that we become totally self-centred and our service for the Lord ceases. No matter what circumstances come into our life, even bereavement, it's not meant to be the finish of our service for God. He goes on: 'they that rejoice, as though they rejoiced not' - every emotion is to be brought under the lordship of Christ, under control. We're not to be excessive in our sorrow, we're not to be excessive in our joy, we can control our emotions. How many stop serving the Lord because of emotions? Whether they're sorrowing because of what another brother has done to them, or whether they're over-joyous because they're newly married, or because they've got a new family or a new job, or more wealth, and they stop serving the Lord for a moment.

Then he goes on: 'they that buy, as though they possessed not' - finances and possessions, Christians who are more concerned about accounts and businesses and cars than their Christianity - the time is short! Jesus is coming! It's time to get the priorities right! Then fifthly he says: 'those who use the world, as though they did

not make full use of it'. Friends, pleasure is not immoral, enjoying yourself is not immoral, but as one author said: 'In times of affluence, ease, permissiveness and inordinate self-acceptance, it is easy to live for pleasure'. To live for more leisure, more recreation, more holidays, more comfortable homes, earlier retirement, occupying these interests - they're not all wrong - but occupying them at the expense of spiritual neglect. Paul is saying all these pass away, distract away from spiritual things, but if you're single you can concentrate more on the spiritual things. As Paul says in verses 34 to 35, the one that's unmarried, their body and their soul is given over to the Lord - that doesn't mean they're more holy, it just means that their body doesn't have to worry about looking after a family, their body can be totally consecrated to the Lord as well. He's only stating a fact.

Now Paul says in verse 35, this isn't a noose put around your neck, I'm speaking to your profit, so that you can serve the Lord without distraction. If you've got the gift of celibacy, use it; don't get married if you've got it! But if you haven't got it, get married - this isn't a noose, he's not trying to drive us down a road that we cannot go. He speaks then in verses 36 to 38, I personally believe, as J.M. Darby translates it and William Kelly translates it, to those young men and young women who hold their own virginity. If they can hold their own virginity, not necessarily fathers with their daughters, or even fiancées with their fiancée, but rather if you can honour God in this way by not getting married, don't get married and honour God - but if you do get married it's not a sin, but it's better, Paul says, concerning the present distress, not to marry.

Will you allow me five minutes or so as we look at the bounds of marriage finally, verses 39 to 40? Again he tells us that marriage is insoluble, and let me say this: that this is the law of last mention, and when God mentions a thing for the last time as He does here, we need to sit up and take note because He's giving His final thoughts on the important matter of marriage and divorce. He says that the only way that marriage can be dissolved is through death. The duration of marriage, verse 39a: 'The wife is bound by the law as long as her husband liveth', the termination of marriage, 39b, 'but if her husband be dead, she is at liberty to be married to whom she will', the exhortation: 'But she is happier if she so abide, after my judgment: and I think also that I have the Spirit of God'.

Paul is giving here advice to widows and widowers. He's saying here that if you have been widowed already, why get married in the present distress and suffer to be widowed again? There's so much comfort, so much instruction in these passages, and this one passage, chapter 7, that we've been looking at over these weeks - and we can apply it to those who are single, widowed, even divorced in the capacity today, those who are married, all of us. What God is doing in this chapter is He's putting walls around marriage, restrictions around marriage, and principles - not to make marriage a prison, but to make it a safe fortress for those who enter into it.

If you want to enjoy the full extent of marriage or singlehood, the best thing to do is to take God's advice, God's principles. Don't forget please, this evening, the main point of what Paul the apostle is bringing to us in all of these lessons as he closes this passage: the time is short, and because of the brevity of time and the transitory nature of everything that's around us, we've got to give ourselves completely to the service of God no matter what situation we find ourselves in. The important things are not the things of time, like money and marriage and health, but the things of eternity! I wonder have you got there? We're standing as a nation on the brink of war, and when a boy goes to war the sum total of that war for his mother is that that young boy comes back one day in one piece. She gets down upon her knees and prays that he'll have a safe return, and that's all she's concerned about in a war, but that's not what the government's concerned about in a war. The government sees the bigger picture, and they're prepared to sacrifice hundreds upon thousands, even millions of mother's sons to defeat the enemy and to keep the glory of the nation. Paul is saying: you see in your home, you see in your marriage, you see in your singlehood and your widowhood? Look at the bigger picture!

There are sacrifices even here that need to be made for eternity. Here's a hymn we often sing to the lost, but I think we need to take a leaf out of it tonight:

'Life at best is very brief,
Like the falling of a leaf,
Like the binding of a sheaf:
Be in time.

Fairest flowers soon decay,
Youth and beauty pass away,
Oh, you have not long to stay:
Be in time'.

Let's sing our final hymn together, 469 - of course, what else can we say but the spirit that the apostle is looking for in our lives is none other than the spirit of our Lord Jesus that went to Calvary and made the ultimate sacrifice for us. The last verse of this hymn says:

'Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were an offering far too small.
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all'.

Whatever situation you find yourself in: that is what God wants! Your soul, your life, your all.

Let's bow our heads - and let me just address us all individually: those married - do you give your partner slack to serve the Lord? Do you allow them? Do you make sacrifices? I know you would love to see them a bit more, but friends it's eternity you're meant to be living for. We're not excusing neglecting children, that's not what we're talking about, or neglecting wives or husbands, but we're talking about mutual sacrifices for the kingdom of God. Single person: do you view your singlehood as a curse or as a gift? Are you using it for the Master? Those widowed: don't let your service end. It's tragic what you're going through, but God still has something for you to do. Even those divorced, left, deserted, not of your own fault: God can still work through you. He can work through us all, if we give our all to Him.

Lord, we thank Thee for grace. We thank Thee for enablement to be what Thou hast planned us to be in Thy sovereign will and mind: to be like Jesus, to give our all, to lay our lives down for His cause. May we do it, Lord, for the time is short and the fashion of this world passes away. May we live for eternity, for Christ's sake, Amen.

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*Appendix A:****"Stand By Your Man - Is Marriage Outdated?"***

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Now let me welcome you to our meeting this evening. As many of you know, we're looking at the subject of marriage - and the subject is: "Stand By Your Man", or if we want to be politically correct, "Stand By Your Woman" as well! We're looking at the subject of how marriage has changed in our society, and the attacks upon it. We understand that marriage is from the word of God, and God has given it to us. But what is happening, and many of you have maybe wondered about this as you've looked at the television screen, as you've read in the newspapers and the periodicals, the things that are happening within our land and indeed within Parliament, and asked the question: 'Well, what is happening to marriage? How do we understand it today? Is it outdated? Is it something that is relevant to the 21st century that we are now entering into?'

Let me thank you for coming. If you're a visitor, if you've come along with a friend, or if you've just come on your own - you've maybe seen it in the paper, or had a card through the door - we make you very welcome, and we trust that the Lord blesses you this evening through His word, and will speak to you in a certain way that will change your life. Now, if you're warm - I'm warm up here, but most of you will know that I'm always warm up here - but if you're warm down there you can take your coat off or make yourself comfortable before we read God's word together, before we turn in our Bibles.

We're going to turn to Genesis chapter 2, and we're having two readings upon this subject. It's important with any subject to begin at the beginning - and that's what we're doing with the subject of marriage. We're looking at its origin first of all, from the first book of the Bible - Genesis, which means 'book of beginnings'. You find the beginning of life, you find the beginning of death, the beginning of sin, the beginning of a family, the beginning of childbirth and many things within the book of beginnings. Here we have, in verse 23, the beginning of marriage.

Verse 23: "And Adam said, This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man. Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh. And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed".

Then the book of Ephesians, this time in the New Testament. There are many other verses that we could read on the subject of marriage, but these are two that I want to really home in on this evening. Ephesians chapter 5 this time, Ephesians 5 - now what you must understand before we read these verses is that the book of Ephesians was written to a Christian church. So what is being talked about here, about being in Christ, is for those that are saved, and those that are saved alone. But there is a lesson about what the marriage relationship represents.

Verse 25: "Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish. So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself. For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church: For we are

members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones. For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh". Now notice this verse: "This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church".

These words may bring back good memories or bad: 'I require and charge you both, as ye will answer at the dreadful day of judgement when the secrets of all hearts shall be disclosed, that either of you know any impediment why ye may not be lawfully joined together in matrimony, ye do now confess it. For be ye well assured that so many as are coupled together otherwise than God's word doth allow are not joined together by God, neither is there matrimony love'. Is everybody still there? Nobody's running out yet! 'Wilt thou have this woman to thy wedded wife, to live together after God's ordinance in the holy estate of matrimony? Wilt thou love her, comfort her, honour and keep her in sickness and in health, and forsaking all others keep thee only unto her so long as ye both shall live?'

What do those words mean? They're not the words of Scripture, that's for sure, but they are words that are based upon Scripture. They're the words that are said at a marriage ceremony. In fact, they are called 'vows' - and that means that they're meant to be kept. It's not just empty words, it is something between a man and a woman that is precious. It is supposed to be a bond for life, supposed to be the most ecstatic experience that a human being can know down here on earth - to know mutual love one for another and to be considered, as the word of God and society considers it, to be classed so close together as to be one person.

What does it mean today? Does it mean anything? Is it outdated? Is it old hat? Is it something that we've inherited from a religious state of years gone by? Has it originated within the halls of ivory of religion? Or is there something in marriage? Is it only a certificate, a piece of paper? Is it only formed legally, or religiously, or civilly speaking? Or is there something more in marriage? We read together, and you listened to those words, 'in sickness and in health'. I want to suggest you this evening that, as we look around our nation, as we look around Belfast and perhaps - I don't know the background of any of you here - but perhaps even your individual lives: marriage is in sickness. It is sick! There is a disease among marriage within our nation. There are many symptoms of that disease, and I want to look at just a few of them with you. I want you, as we listen to them - whether you're married or not - to look around you in our nation, in the environment in which we live, and ask yourself: is that true?

There is divorce. In 1995 there were approximately 155,000 divorces in England and Wales. That affected approximately 160,000 boys and girls. That compares to 74,000 divorces in 1971 - double it! Over half, we're told, of all divorces occur before a couple's tenth wedding anniversary. It's predicted that 41% of all marriages in the United Kingdom will end in divorce - almost half. Today divorce is not the vogue, but now what we hear of today is 'second divorces'. People who have been married - a quarter of all the population - who have been married, involved in marriages, with at least one partner who is on their second divorce. There is much research which shows that the experience of divorce can lead to both short-term and long-term effects for the children within it. Divorce.

Then there's adultery. We'll say a little bit more on this, but simply to say this: many of you will know the ten commandments, and what God says about adultery mightn't be very important to you at this moment of time, but I hope at the end of the meeting it will be - and He says, 'Thou shalt not commit adultery'. The writer to the Hebrews, in the New Testament, says: 'Marriage is honourable in all, and the bed undefiled: but whoremongers and adulterers God will judge'.

Then there's 'cohabitation' - that's the fancy word for living together. There has been a great rise in living together before, or instead of, getting married. In the 1970s 1 in 10 first marriages was preceded by cohabitation, whereas in the early 1990s 7 out of 10 marriages were preceded - people lived together, before they were wed. Over one-third, 34% of births in England and Wales in 1995 were outside of marriage.

Then there's promiscuity - and I believe that in our society today we suffer from the fallout of 'free love' of the Sixties and Seventies - or should I say 'free lust'. The one night stand then has now become a seven-day week for many. You can sleep with a partner, you can leave them that night, forget their name, forget anything about them, never meet them again.

Then, perhaps more prevalent in our day and age than ever it has been, is what the Bible calls 'sodomy' - homosexuality to most. In April of this year the House of Lords defeated the move by our Parliament to lower the homosexual age of consent from the age of 18 to 16. If the Lords defeat it a second time the government, our government, propose to use what is called 'The Parliament Act' to force it through no matter what! You may have heard about, on the news or in the paper, about the repeal of Section 28. That has been attempted in recent days. What Section 28 is is simply this: it prevents all local authorities and government spending public money, your money and mine, in promoting homosexuality as, I quote, 'a pretended family relationship'. Do you know what this means? You better be sure the government's going to make sure that this is pushed through, no matter what the Lords say - because as far as they're concerned the Lords is full of old bishops that know nothing. It will mean this: that your wee boy will be open to be taught a sodomite relationship as acceptable. I don't know whether you've seen the books about how they're going to teach your boys and girls that this is normal.

This is what we live in. This is what the word of God, let me say, has prophesied! But God has declared - and this is one thing we can be sure of, we can't be sure about our politicians, we can't be sure of our environment, we can't even be sure about the church of Jesus Christ, but we can be sure about God's word when He says: 'Thou shalt not lie with mankind as with womankind, it is an abomination'. 'For this cause God gave them up unto vile affections: for even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature: And likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust one toward another; men with men working that which is unseemly, and receiving in themselves that recompense of their error which was meet. Who knowing the judgment of God, that they which commit such things are worthy of death, not only do the same, but have pleasure in them that do them'.

That's our society! 'I'm heterosexual, that's OK, I can live and let live. You can live whatever way you want. You can have a partner that you want'. They may not be homosexual in themselves, but the word of God says they have pleasure in them that do it. 'Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, shall enter, inherit, the kingdom of God'. Make no bones about it, homosexuality or sodomy is against all that is God.

Then there's pornography. You don't need to get Sky television or cable any more, you can get it on your own TV at home. But the sad thing of how this has become a disease in marriage is this: that some husbands, and sadly now wives, now find more satisfaction in a glossy computer-enhanced whore in a monthly magazine, or a film, or on the Internet, than in a loving relationship with their husband or wife!

Then there's abuse, violence, sexual abuse, physical abuse, mental abuse - and all of these abuses seem to stem from all sorts of problems, but the root always seems to be hate!

Then there is women's lib, which is a perversion of the biblical roles of a man and a woman within the marriage relationship. A cry of independence from the necessity of a need for men. Germaine Greer - 'The Female Eunuch', she wrote - she stemmed a revolution in feminism within our society, and what has it brought?

Then there's atheism, or agnosticism - 'I don't believe, or I simply don't know'. The outcome of both of those is this: no accountability to anyone but myself, therefore no need for commitment. 'I am only accountable to number one'.

Then there's drunkenness. How many homes have been wrecked by the social perfume of alcohol? You've seen it, you've heard about it. Homes torn asunder, marriages broken, children defiled and abused because of alcohol! Well might the word of God say: 'Who hath woe? Who hath sorrow? Who hath contentions? Who hath babbling? Who hath wounds without cause? Who hath redness of eyes?...At the last it biteth like a serpent, and stingeth like an adder. Thine eyes shall behold strange women, and thine heart shall utter perverse things'. Many a thing was done in a dark corner in a drunken stupor, and many a man can't even remember what it was.

Then there's career obsession. No time for your spouse or for your child.

Then there's the media, TV, music, the press, advertising - perhaps three or four soaps a day on the television that portray adultery, fornication, sodomy, as an accepted norm for society and for our children!

Then there's medicine. Psychology used to say that homosexuality was a disease of the mind, but now the whole of psychology - and sadly even all medicine - has caved into the political correctness with regards to the modern pagan views of sexuality. If you want to change from a man to a woman, you can get it.

Education, government - it's no longer an advantage with the taxman to be married. It's a good way to discourage people getting married, isn't it? Do you see it? Now, I haven't said too much about the Bible yet - but these are all facts, you can get them, I can send you to government offices and get these facts. This is fact! Marriage is breaking down! Our society is breaking down from all these things: adultery, fornication, cohabitation, promiscuity, sodomy, pornography, abuse - all sorts of iniquities are destroying the marriage relationship.

Do you know something? I believe that everybody here has a conscience - it may be defiled very much by sin, but it's a conscience nevertheless. Statistics tell us that 14, only 14% of people think that marriage is outdated. They know what is right and wrong!

There's a verse I would like us to think about for a moment, it's Revelation 18 verse 5 - you've no need to turn to it, but listen to this - God is looking down in a future day upon our earth, and He says of the earth: 'Her sins have reached unto heaven, and God hath remembered her iniquities'. I believe we could be living in that day. All those sins that I have mentioned are only within the marriage remit, there are many other sins we could talk about that have nothing to do with marriage - and how many millions would there be! God says: 'All of them are reaching Me in heaven because there's so much!'.

There's only one reason for the symptoms of the sickness of marriage - do you know what it is? Three letters that are outdated, they're trampled in the mud, they're laughed at today - in fact some gospel preachers won't even mention it - and it's called 'sin', sin. Sin is the sickness of marriage, and always has been. It's the greatest problem in all the world for everything - and if you were to turn to Genesis 3, we read from Genesis 2, but in Genesis 3 you would find there the origin of sin: that it came right within a marriage relationship!

There were Adam and Eve in the garden, and God said: 'Of all the trees in the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil - don't eat of it! For in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die'. What did they do? They ate it, and it says one man - by one man - sin entered into the world, and every child that was born after Adam was born in his likeness, he was born in sin and shapen in iniquity - so much so that the word of God says that there is no difference, we are all the same, all have

sinned and come short of the glory of God. We have fallen, and as our planet falls through the light years of space, spiritually speaking this nation, this environment, this planet is dying spiritually. My friend, if you are without Christ, no matter how you feel, no matter how your mind is, if you don't have Him, if you don't know Him, if you don't know salvation you're dead in your sin! Oh, I know sin is laughed at - a wee poem says this:

'I dreamed last night that I had come
To dwell in topsy-turvydom,
Where vice is virtue; virtue, vice.
Where nice is nasty and nasty, nice.
Where right is wrong, wrong is right.
Where white is black and black is white'.

Is that not where you live? Is that not the world in which you reside? God said it many thousands of years ago: 'Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil' - that turn the commandments, turn God's holiness and righteous laws upside-down to suit themselves, and every man does that which is right in his own eyes! Man calls it an accident, God calls it an abomination. Man calls it a blunder, God calls it blindness. Man calls it a defect, God calls it a disease. Man calls it chance, God calls it a choice. Man calls it an error, God calls it enmity. Man calls it a fascination, God calls it a fatality. Man calls it an infirmity, God calls it iniquity. Man calls it luxury, God calls it leprosy. Man calls it liberty, God calls it lawlessness. Man calls it a trifle, God calls it a tragedy. Man calls it a mistake, God calls it madness. Man calls it weakness, God calls it wilfulness. Sin, sin is the destruction of marriage. In fact, I would go further to say that sin is the destruction of all things!

The late Dr J. Wilbur Chapman used to tell of a Methodist preacher who often spoke on the subject of sin, and he never minced his words about it - but he declared and preached: 'That abominable thing that God hates'. A leader in his congregation came and said: 'Now, Dr so-and-so I don't like the way you're using that word 'sin', because our young people are here, they're hearing you. They'll be more likely to indulge into sin because you're preaching on it, call it something else - an inhibition, or an error, or a mistake, or even a twist in our nature'. He looked at him and he said: 'Well, I understand what you mean' - and the preacher took his hand and opened a drawer in his desk, and lifted out a little bottle. He said: 'This contains a chemical, and you'll see a wee read label that reads 'Poison' - would you like me to change it to medicine?'

Is that not right? Does that not make sense to you? Should we make something more harmless [looking], and then make it more dangerous? Oh, sin is sin. Can you imagine if I went home - now I don't have gas in the house - but imagine if I went into a caravan or something, and before I went to bed instead of turning the gas off, I blew it out. I'm lying in bed, and all of a sudden we smell this smell of gas - and I get up and I run into the bathroom and open the cabinet and I get the aftershave, and I spray it all over me and all over my wife and all over everything in the whole building - and then I go back to bed! That would be foolishness, would it not? It doesn't deal with the problem, but it would kill us.

That's what sin is like. You can dress it up, you can give it a new name, you can try and pretend it doesn't exist - whether it's in your marriage, whether it's in your heart, whether it's in your life in any conceivable idea I can imagine - wherever it is, if it's there my friend you can't disguise it! Psychologically you can block it out of your mind, you can try to argue with yourself that it doesn't exist, that it's not really a problem, that you've got it under control. You can do all you like about it, but God says - as we have read - that He sees into men's hearts! He sees into yours.

Sin is against all that is God. Sin is the destroyer of marriage. Billy Sunday said, the baseball evangelist, listen to this: 'I'm against sin. I'll kick it as long as I've got a foot. I'll fight it as long as I've got a fist. I'll butt

it as long as I've got a head. I'll bite it as long as I've got a tooth. When I am old and fistless and footless and toothless, I'll gum it till I go to glory and it goes home to hell!'. Do you know what Satan's plan for marriage is from the beginning? His plan is that it be destroyed. Why is that? Why would Satan want marriage to be destroyed? Answer - because underlying his plan is this: the age-old vehement attack between God and Satan himself. Because marriage is not simply a physical, or sexual, or emotional, or legal, or social thing - but marriage, according to the word of God, is spiritual!

You might say: 'David, you listed a whole lot of sins this evening. Now, I'm not a Christian, but I can assure you that I haven't done anything like what you've been talking about'. Can I say that you've just admitted the greatest sin that a human being can commit? You've said: 'I'm not a Christian'. You might not have committed adultery, you may not be a sodomite - or you never would have a fear of it in the rest of your days on this planet - you may not be involved in pornography, or drunkenness, or anything. You could be as holy as holy can be in this world's eyes, but let me tell you: if you are without Christ those sins, primarily, will not damn you - but the fact that you've rejected Him will.

Do you understand that? It wouldn't matter that you'd kept the slate squeaky clean from the day that you were born, if you've never trusted Christ, if you've never brought Him into your life, if you've never made Him King and Lord of all that you have - and the sad thing about it is this: that the lower a chair gets, whether it be in sin or whether it be in not trusting Christ, the more comfortable it becomes. You're very comfortable the way you are tonight, aren't you? But you see in any marriage, in any life, there must be a partnership of three. In marriage, for some of you perhaps, two's company and three's a crowd - because three doesn't mean anybody else but God! It's like a triangle, with the man and the woman, and then God at the top - and if you take God away from the top the whole structure, the whole thing falls in.

Is the missing part of your marriage, or your relationship, God? Is it? Jesus Christ, when He was on the earth, said this: 'Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you'. Could the spark that's missing from your marriage be Jesus Christ?

But also, as I finish, marriage represents the relationship of salvation and the Gospel. This is why the devil hates it so much! We read in the book of Ephesians these words: 'Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh. This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church'. Are you married? Do you know what your marriage relationship represents? Christ and His church! Therefore, he says, you're to love your wife as Christ loved the church and gave Himself for it. Listen: that's why the devil hates marriage! Because the devil hates the cross, because the cross is what can save marriage, the cross is what can save your life, can save you from your drinking, from your wandering, from all the problems that you have - the cross is what will save you!

The devil wants to go throughout our society - whether it's in the institution of marriage, or the institutions of the church, or government, or whatever in the state that has ever represented or talked about or shown any form of God at all - he wants to go through it all and clean out God out of everything! Does that not make sense? Oh, I believe some of you can see it all too well in society, but you just won't admit it - but you know what the devil wants to get rid of so much is the cross.

Do you remember how Peter came to the Lord Jesus and said: 'Far be it from Thee...' - do you know what he was really saying in our terms? 'Think again! Talking about dying, talking about going to the cross? What are You talking about? You're the Messiah!' - and the devil was in him, because the Lord Jesus turned round to him and said: 'Get thee behind me Satan!'. Do you remember when He was on the cross, and I think it was demons in men that came and said: 'Look at Him! He saved others, Himself He cannot save! Look at Him! If Thou be the Christ come down from the cross and save Thyself!'. The devil did everything to get Him down,

do you know why? Because when He was there, He was there for you. He was there bleeding and dying for your marriage. He was there bleeding and dying for your sins, for your problems, for your self-righteous religiosity, whatever it may be - there on the cross He was taking your place, He was taking my place, He was dying standing where I should have stood! He was taking my hell!

Do you know that? Do you know that there's devil worshippers in County Down, and every Friday they fast and they pray for the destruction of Christian marriages? That's how much Satan hates it - because it tells of the love of God in Christ, the love of God for you, that Jesus loves you! That Jesus came from heaven to earth in the form of a man, He suffered everything that you and I suffered - except for sin. He walked to the lonely cross in poverty, without a pillow to lay His head on, without a home to live in - and there He hung between heaven and earth dying for your sin! If me preaching about promiscuity and drunkenness, and all these sorts of sins, doesn't make you weep - that ought to make you weep. My friend, He stood in your place - He stood in your place! God help you if you ever lift your eyes up in hell, in torments, and remember this meeting - I think you'll remember this: that He stood in your place and you rejected Him! I would not like to be in anybody's shoes who rejects Christ and goes to hell. For if they do it, there will be a hell to pay.

I cannot stress this more to you. We've been talking about sin, and when we think of sin we often think of the colour black. I don't know why that is, dirt perhaps. But, you know, the Bible doesn't describe sin as black, it describes sin as scarlet. Painters tell us that scarlet is the most difficult colour to cover over with another colour - you can't do it. You can cover over black with something, but not scarlet - the only way to cover over scarlet is to cover it over with red! God's word says this - my friend, wherever you are, whoever you are, whatever you've done, no matter what you come from or what you do - God says to all here this evening: 'Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil; Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord' - listen - 'Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow'. You see, it's only the blood of Jesus, it's only that blood that was shed there at Calvary's cross out of love for you that can take away those scarlet stains of your sin, and make them pristine white wool.

Mr J. Pierpont-Morgan was one of the biggest ever financiers in the world. Many of his business transactions were big enough to shake the financial equilibrium of the whole planet. But there was one transaction in his life that evidently stood out of supreme importance to him, and he wrote in his diary before he died - listen to this: 'I commit my soul into the hands of my Saviour, full of confidence that having redeemed me and washed me with His most precious blood, He will present me faultless before the Throne of my Heavenly Father'.

Some say that your career is the most important decision in life. Some say that what we've been thinking about this evening, marriage, is the most important decision you will ever make. No! Have you ever made your transaction with God? Have you ever had the blood of Christ applied to your sin to cleanse it? Have you had a day, an hour, a minute in your life's experience where you knelt at the cross and asked God to save you and forgive you? For, my friend, if you haven't you've more than a marriage problem!

Let us pray. We've talked about many things, and perhaps some of these things have pricked your heart. Perhaps God - and it was God, it wasn't me for I don't know most of you - God has put His finger on something in your life, what are you going to do? Are you going to ignore Him again? Are you going to gamble with hell? Are you going to put your arms up, and say: 'Lord, take me. Lord, I have done wrong. My life mightn't seem to be a mess outside, but it is inside. Lord, I need You. Save me, forgive me - I'm sorry'? You can do that now, or you can talk to me on the way out - I'll be here for some time if you want to have a chat, or if you want me to show you better how to trust the Lord, I'm at your disposal. There's some free literature at the back door on the table - for Christians only I must add, or backsliders - if God has spoken to you, why not take a leaflet? If you've trusted the Lord this evening, will you tell us so that we can rejoice with you?

Our Father, we thank Thee for this time, we thank Thee for Thy word and how it has the answer to all of life's problems. But we know that the problem behind all problems is the problem of sin. Lord there are many here with many backgrounds, with many standards of morals - whether in the gutter, or whether perhaps in the heights of morality - yet Lord, if they're without Christ they're without hope. Lord, would You administer grace to them this evening, and save their precious soul? Amen.

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