

VCBC SLG Fall Term 2023
The Book of I Corinthians
Lesson #5
Answers to Their Letter (I)
Chapter 7

I. Introduction:

Now that he has finished addressing the several reports that he has heard, likely all from Chloe's household, Paul now turns his attention to addressing "the matters" they wrote to them beginning with:

- To marry or not to marry (chapter 7) and
- To eat or not to eat food sacrificed to idols (chapter 8), and

Concerning the "letter", Fee opines that "Rather than a friendly exchange, in which the new believers in Corinth are asking spiritual advice of their mentor in the Lord, their letter was probably a response to Paul previous (missing) letter mentioned in 5:9, in which they were taking exception to his position on point after point. In light of their own theology of spirit, with heavy emphasis on 'wisdom' and 'knowledge', they have answered Paul with a kind of 'why can't we?' attitude, in which they are looking for his response." (Fee, 267)

I tend to agree with Fee, especially given Paul's return to a very emotional outburst in the midst of his answers, emphasising once again his "apostleship" in chapter 9.

7: 1 – 7: 40 To Marry or Not to Marry

7: 1-7—Depriving one's body in marriage

"Now for the matters you wrote about: 'It is good for a man not to marry (*to touch a woman*). 2 But since sexual immorality is occurring, each man should have (sexual relations with) his own wife, and each woman (with) her own husband. 3 The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. 4 The wife does not have authority over her own body but (yields it to) her husband. In the same way, the husband does not have authority over his own body but (yields it to) his wife. 5 Do not deprive each other except perhaps by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. 6 I say this as a concession, not as a command. 7 I wish that all of you were as I am. But each of you has your own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that."

The background:

- Given what we know about the city of Corinth, while Paul only uses one word, "fornication" and many versions fill in with "there is so much immorality" or "sexual immorality is occurring", it is not a stretch. The case of the tolerance of "incest" among them gives us a pretty good idea how lax the church's attitude is toward sexual immorality.
- Many commentators, on the other hand, opine that the church adopts such a dualistic idea that not being involved in any sexual relations, even within marriage, is a spiritual ,

ascetic ideal. It might be true of other Christians at the time, but the Corinthians? I doubt it very much.

- Rather, I think Paul is simply addressing this matter common to most marriages, even Christian marriages, that easily leads Christians into sexual temptation which he just addressed in the previous chapter, commanding them to “flee from sexual immorality” (6:18)

The reality of sex within a marriage:

- While we do acknowledge that marriage is not just for sex, Paul points out clearly that sex is very a part of our commitment in marriage—to satisfy the sexual need of our spouse, and Paul calls it “a debt to be paid”—a literal translation of “marital duty”, and as such
- Paul explains that the authority of one’s body (when it comes to “marital duty”), belongs to the spouse.
- Some modern translators obviously find this hard to accept and thus decide to add that the body does not belong to oneself “alone”, but to the spouse “also”. But such translations are not faithful to the original text.
- As a result, Paul gives the command, “Do not deprive each other” (v.5) and the word for “deprive” basically means to “steal” or “rob” (Bauer’s).

Paul’s Concession:

- However, Paul understands that sexual union is sacred, and cannot be reduced to purely animal instinct, and there are often valid reasons for a spouse to withhold his or her own body. Such reasons often concern broken trust, grudges, and/or misunderstanding. In this case, Paul gives a very practical advice:
 - The couple can call a “time-out”: but must be by mutual consent and for “a time”.
 - How long should such a time be? Paul does not specify, except that Paul points out that the purpose of such a “time-out” is for devotion to prayers, but both parties as Christians, the purpose of which is for reconciliation.
- Paul says that this is a “concession” on his part, because he fears that such a “time-out” will give ground (or a foothold) to Satan to tempt one or both of them to commit adultery, especially
 - Should they not devote themselves to prayers, and/or
 - Should the time be prolonged!

Note: V.1 & v.7 appear to form an “*inclusio*” to anchor Paul’s opinion toward Christian marriage in this and the next chapter in that

- Being a Christian single is a “good” thing—speaking by experience, but
- Such a gift is given (and decided) by God.

[There is quite a bit of discussions or debates as to whether Paul was a widower or simply an unmarried man. Given his appearance at a young age at Stephen’s martyrdom and his “soon” conversion-story on the road to Damascus and without any reference to his family in Acts, it would appear that he has never married.]

7: 8-16—Unequally Yoked Marriages

“Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I do. 9 But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion.

10 To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. 11 But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife.

12 To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord): If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. 13 And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. 14 For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. 15 But if the unbeliever leaves, let it be so. The brother or the sister is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace. 16 How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife? “

The Context:

- Given the fact that not both husbands and wives are converted to Christ at the same time, many spouses (likely women) find it hard to practice their faith without hindrance from their unbelieving spouses, and
- Given Paul’s admonition that since as believers, they are now “united” with Christ and even their “bodies” are members of Christ (6:15), they wonder whether their continued union with their unbelieving spouse would amount to committing sins against their own bodies (6:18).

The core principle:

- From here onwards, one theme will surface time and again, and that is the theme of “staying or remaining where we are,” the meaning of which will be explained by Paul in each of the cases (or situations).

“Staying where one” is #1—the Singles (vv. 8-9)

- Those who are unmarried or widows: Paul is speaking to those who, likely, are never married (like him), or have lost their spouses (widows would include widowers).
- Paul’s advice is for them to remain single, and it is good, the reason for which will be explained later by Paul.
- However, if they are “burnt” with sexual desire to the point that they cannot control themselves, Paul’s advice is to get married.
- It sounds horrible that Paul would advise people to get married, simply for sex purposes, but it is obvious that it isn’t the purpose of marriage that Paul is advocating as he beautifully talks about love and commitment within a Christian marriage in Ephesians 5. Rather, he gives very practical advice to Christians in order to avoid sexual immorality.

Even if one gets into marriage with the wrong reason (for sex alone in t his case, and many Christians do get married for other wrong reasons), it is the church’s duty to steer them back to God’s design for marriage in discipling them.

“Staying where one is” #2—the already married (vv.10-16)

- Presumably because many married women have become believers, while their husband remain unsaved; the thought of separating from their husband has become a question that they put before the Apostle Paul in their letter.
- In addressing the wives (vv. 10-11), Paul makes it clear that Jesus Himself has explicitly addressed this issue already on Matthew 19: 7-9:
- **“‘Why then,’ they asked, ‘did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?’⁸ Jesus replied, ‘Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning.⁹ I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.’”**
- Since Paul is quoting from the Lord, therefore whatever being said of the husband equally applies to the wife, therefore, while Paul uses the word to “separate”, which, in Paul’s opinion, is no different from to “divorce”.
- Yes, according to Jewish tradition at the time, for a wife to divorce a husband was generally not allowed. “Divorce was the man’s prerogative” (Fee, 294). However, according to Greco-Roman tradition (the culture and law the Corinthian Christians were under), wives could divorce the husband as well and that is presumably the context within which Paul is addressing.
- Morris adds that “separation” has become a technical term in connexion with divorce by then (Morris, 105).
 - The command from the Lord: no divorce (with the exception of adultery)
 - The further instruction from Paul: if already separated (or divorced)
 1. Must remain unmarried, or (better yet)
 2. Seek reconciliation.
- Paul’s further instruction: (not quoting from the Lord now—that’s the meaning of “I, not the Lord”—vv. 12-16)
 - Even if Spouse is still an unbeliever, she should stay married with the spouse
 - The question for them is: “Should I, who is now united with Christ, be united physically with an unbelieving spouse?”
 - Paul’s answer in three parts:
 1. Unbelieving spouse has been *sanctified* because of believing spouse
 2. Thus, children so born, are not unclean, but *holy*
 3. Chances are “you” may *save* your unbelieving spouse.

1. “Has been sanctified” obviously does not mean “saved” which is addressed in the 3rd point by Paul, but rather it refers to the union itself is still considered sacred, approved of God;
2. Thus the children so produced out of a sacred union are of course, holy, in the sense of being approved of God; and

3. Just as Peter admonishes the believing wives, their own husbands **“may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives, when they see the purity and reverence of your lives”** (2 Peter 3:1-2), not to mention that God does answer such intercessory prayers (Luke 11:12).

- One final note from Paul: **“But if the unbeliever leaves, let it be so. The brother or the sister is not bound in such circumstances”**
 - “bound” is the word for being “enslaved” and if we take this statement literally, it means that the believer is free to remarry if he or she chooses to leave. “But despite a long tradition that it has so interpreted it, several converging data indicate that Paul is essentially repeating his first sentence “ (Fee 302) that it is good to stay unmarried.

7: 17 – 40 Staying Where One is

7: 17 – 20 “Staying where one is” #3—Circumcision

“17 Nevertheless, each person should retain the place (situation) that the Lord has assigned to him, just as God has called him. This is the rule I lay down in all the churches.

18 Was a man already circumcised when he was called? He should not become uncircumcised. Was a man uncircumcised when he was called? He should not be circumcised. 19 Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God’s commands is what counts. 20 Each person should remain in the situation they were in when God called them.”

Drawing from his admonition concerning marital status in which he reiterates the principle of “staying where one is”, now he applies to other situation, with the explicit emphasis to “remain in the situation they were in when God called them” which acts as an “inclusion” (v.17 & v.20).

Before we look at Paul’s application of this principle, we need to understand the meaning of “call” in this respect:

- **“When God called them”**: it is important to know that the word for “calling” is exclusively used in the Bible to refer to God calling His people to Himself (and is not referring to the non-biblical Latin word, *“vocatio”* which has been used to expand such a call to one’s profession which, according to Fee, has been a product of the successive influence of the Enlightenment, Industrial Revolution and the Postmodern Revolution (Fee, *Offer Yourselves to God*).
- And when it comes to the use of the word “call or *kaleo*” in 7:20, it hearkens back to 1:9 in which Paul says, **“God is faithful, who has called you into koinonia with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord”** which, according to Fee, “is the only understanding of calling in the New Testament.” (Fee, *Offer*, p.14)

- One more thing: when Paul says each should remain in the “situation” (7:20), it is the word, “*klesis*” which also can be translated as a “call” and is used exclusively of “the divine call of the invitation to enter the kingdom of God.” (Bauer’s, 435)

Therefore, God’s command which is what counts (v.19) is for us to enter into fellowship with His Son. Therefore, whether we are circumcised or not at the time of this divine call, it really does not matter.

- Of course, if one is already circumcised at the time of conversion, there is no way one can undo his circumcision physically, so what Paul is reiterating that “**circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit,**” (Romans 2:29) and however one views our spiritual status is absolutely unimportant, as long as we remain devoted to our call to have fellowship with Jesus Christ.

7: 21 – 24 “Staying where one is” #4—Slave or a freeman

“Were you a slave when you were called? Don’t let it trouble you—although if you can gain your freedom, do so. 22 For the one who was a slave when called to faith in the Lord is the Lord’s freed person; similarly, the one who was free when called is Christ’s slave. 23 You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men. 24 Brothers and sisters, each person, as responsible to God, should remain in the situation they were in when God called them.”

- Like having a non-believing spouse, being a slave as a Christian is another troubling reality faced by some of the new believers in the Corinthian church.
- Paul again points out even such an unfortunate and unjust situation does not negate and should not distract them from the true calling of believers to enter into fellowship with the Son of God. Therefore should not let their desire to change their status distract them from this calling.
- However, if for whatever reason they can gain their freedom, Paul says go ahead, but the more important thing is that they are already a free person in Christ, free from the bondage of sin, the neglect of which means
 - They have forgotten that they have a Master who bought them for a (huge) price, and thus
 - Even they gain their physical freedom, they are still “slaves of men”.
 - Therefore, should focus on to whom they are responsible—it is God, their true Master!

7: 25 – 35 “Staying where one is” #5—Good to stay unmarried

“Now about virgins: I have no command from the Lord, but I give a judgment as one who by the Lord’s mercy is trustworthy. 26 Because of the present crisis, I think that it is good for a man to remain as he is. 27 Are you pledged to a woman? Do not seek to be released. Are you free from such a commitment? Do not look for a wife. 28 But if you do marry, you have not

sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned. But those who marry will face many troubles in this life, and I want to spare you this.

29 What I mean, brothers and sisters, is that the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they do not; **30** those who mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they were not; those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep; **31** those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away.

32 I would like you to be free from concern. An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord's affairs—how he can please the Lord. **33** But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world—how he can please his wife— **34** and his interests are divided. An unmarried woman or virgin is concerned about the Lord's affairs: Her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit. But a married woman is concerned about the affairs of this world—how she can please her husband. **35** I am saying this for your own good, not to restrict you, but that you may live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord."

Now, Paul returns to his beginning passionate plea for the Corinthian believers to remain "unmarried" (7:1), and here he shares with them the reasons for his plea:

- Because of the present crisis (v.26)
- The many troubles in this life (v.28)
- The time is short (v.29)
- The world in its present form is passing away (v.31)
- Therefore, live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord (v.25)

The words for crises and troubles, "both words are employed elsewhere in NT to speak of the great eschatological woes that precede the Parousia (the Lord's return)" (Fee, 329), especially by the Lord in Luke 21:23 & Matthew 24:21. Together with his emphasis on the time being short and the reminder that the world in its present form is passing away (2 Peter 3: 10-13), Paul is expecting the Lord's return being very imminent.

Now, we need to understand that Biblical prophecies are often multi-layered. As the Holy Spirit inspires the prophets to foretell the future, it often draws on the more immediate situation, but the prophecies ultimately point to a consummation at a much later date. A case in point is the fulfillment of Joel's prophecy at Pentecost. While Peter affirms that the prophecies of Joel (Joel 2: 28-32) have been fulfilled about the "last days" through the tongue-speaking miracle of the apostles (Acts 2:16), a good part of the same prophecy, like the sun turning dark and moon to blood has yet to be fulfilled. As we know the latter part of this prophecy will be fulfilled at the 2nd coming of the Lord

Likewise, as Paul sees that "the present crisis" and "the many troubles in this life" as an indication the time is short for the eventual coming of Christ, he is right in that

- The increasing severity of the persecution of believers has come to pass within less than 10 years of his writing (he wrote I Corinthians likely in AD. 56), and he and Peter would be martyred by Nero in the mid 60's together with many Christians who were burnt or clothed with animal skins to be devoured by beasts (in the Roman arenas) shortly after AD. 64.
- The persecution of this Jewish sect (as the Romans saw it), would cumulate eventually to the complete destruction of Jerusalem by General Titus in AD. 70 to quell Jewish rebellions.

Indeed, Paul time was short and so was that of the Christians in his era, including the Corinthian Christians.

Since such will be the case, Paul basically is admonishing them with the question, "How then shall we live?" And, his answer is, "live in a right way (befitting) in undivided devotion to the Lord." (v.35)

- Thus, whether virgins or any unmarried men
- Best is to remain as they are—being single!
- But Paul is being realistic too, if already pledged, go ahead to get married!
- We might wonder why Paul says, if the virgin marries, she has not sinned"?
- Of course, she has not, or for that matter none of us would!
- But the context assumes that the Corinthian Christians believe as Paul does, the Lord is so imminent that by marrying they would necessarily not be able to devote their lives singularly to the Lord, as they could if they remain single. It is in that sense that those who wish to follow Paul's advice would feel having sinned against the Lord.
- But Paul says, such is not the case!

Though they have not sinned, Paul still makes his case about the need to maintain singular devotion given the time is short (in order to identify with Paul's passion, we need to put ourselves in his shoes, so to speak, and "imagine" that our time is also just as short—which, perhaps, is not really an "imagination", given also our "present crisis").

- Do not get attached to people and things of this life (vv. 29-31)
 - Married as if unmarried
 - Not so much of ignoring your spouse, but to "seek first the Kingdom of God" (Matthew 6:33)
 - Do not mourn the losses (of someone dear)
 - The urgency and the distress that accompany "the time" perhaps remind Paul of the prophet Ezekiel who was told not to mourn of the loss of his wife in 588 B.C. (Ezekiel 24:15) as a warning of the impending complete destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.
 - To mourn over the death of a loved is only human, and Jesus did weep at the death of Lazarus. The original Greek does not really say that we should not mourn, but "mourn as if you are not mourning".

- The meaning is not to mourn to the point of being overcome with your mourning and forget who we are in Christ and the time in which we live.
 - Do not be happy with gains
 - The same with rejoicing: do not be overwhelmed with joy that we forget who we are in Christ and the time in which we live.
 - Acquiring assets without holding on to them
 - “holding” as in grasping and would not let go!
 - I always remember the (true) story about the nun who abandoned everything to enter into a monastery and demonstrated her commitment not to “own” any earthly thing by marking on her own Bible these words, “For use by” so and so. Even her beloved Bible is not hers!
 - Using things without being obsessed with them
 - Never say, “I cannot do with it!”
- Paul’s wish: they be focused on pleasing the Lord—that’s what he would care about (vv. 32-35)
 - The man:
 - If unmarried, a better chance of such a focus (really?)
 - A married man necessarily is distracted by other “cares”, especially concerned to please wife (instead of the Lord). The result? A Divided heart!
 - The women:
 - A virgin, again, has a better chance of such a focus—to care about the things of the Lord—being holy (set apart) in both body and spirit!
 - A married woman, likewise, is distracted and divided just like a married man.
 - Purpose of such an admonition:
 - Not meant to impose a restriction or snare)
 - But be able to live in a right (proper) way to befit
 - Serve the Lord “undistractedly.
 - Note the repeated emphases are highlighted by two words
 - “cares”: the same word used by our Lord in Matthew 6, asking us not to “worry” as pagans do, but to seek first His kingdom and righteousness; and
 - “please”: As Bauer in his Lexicon, highlights the first meaning of this word as, “strife to please” (Bauer’s, 105)

7: 36 – 40 “Staying where one is” #6—Better to be Unmarried--Not meant to be a Guilt Trip!

“If anyone is worried that he might not be acting honorably toward the virgin he is engaged to, and if his passions are too strong and he feels he ought to marry, he should do as he wants. He is not sinning. They should get married.

37 But the man who has settled the matter in his own mind, who is under no compulsion but has control over his own will, and who has made up his mind not to marry the virgin—this man

also does the right thing. 38 So then, he who marries the virgin does right, but he who does not marry her does better.

39 A woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, but he must belong to the Lord. 40 In my judgment, she is happier if she stays as she is—and I think that I too have the Spirit of God.”

Paul is obviously afraid that he has inadvertently put the Corinthian Christians on a guilt trip which is not his intent, therefore he seeks to temper his passionate plea with these words:

- About those who have pledged to marry someone (some opine that it really refers to the father of the virgin which is not really supported by the plain reading of text)
 - Should honor such a pledge
 - Especially the person has passed his or her normal age for marriage (not likely referring to passion as according to NIV), and
 - “ought to be”—could imply not having the gift of celibacy.
 - Again, “he”, likely referring to the groom, is not sinning.
- However, under the following conditions that the man could refrain from following through with the “engagement” (though some insist that engagement was as good as having married in those days)
 - He has settled in his own mind—he is sure that he really wants to and is right in so doing
 - He is under no compulsion, but has control of his own will—meaning not coerced by outside influence or any person, and
 - He has made up his mind.
- With such repeated emphases, Paul is urging the person not to take this decision likely
 - As much as this is, in Paul’s opinion is the right thing to do—to stay single
 - Paul also understands the social ramifications of such an unusual breach of a pledge!
 - But he insists, under the present circumstances of crisis, troubles and the imminent return of the Lord, that this is a better decision, in order to devote oneself to the things of the Lord.

Paul ends with giving permission to a widow to remarry with one condition:

- The groom has to be a believer.
 - If being married to a believer could be such a distraction given the time they live in, one can imagine being married to one who does not belong to the Lord.

But still he insists that “she is happier” to remain unmarried:

- Happier, perhaps, both in the sense that she is able to please the Lord singularly, and
- Be spared of the troubles of a married life (in Paul’s opinion)
- But on this point, Paul while indirectly affirms that he is speaking with the approval of the Spirit of God,
- He also adds that that’s what he “thinks”, and it is only “his opinion”, and is not claiming Spirit-inspiration with this last comment!